ABSTRACT

Artisan: On Bread and a Meaningful Life

by

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In the fall of 2009 the cookbook, Crust and Crumb: Mater Formula’s for Serious Bakers found its way into my hands. Despite no previous experience with baking, I was drawn to the philosophy outlined by the author in the introduction. Peter Reinhart wrote, “Life goes on from moment to moment, experience to experience, and never seems to stop offering lessons for growth. What many people lack, though, is a way to tie these experiences into a meaningful whole, a context in which to experience the connectedness of all creation. Many of these potential life lessons slip past us because we do not have an adequate gathering net. For me, bread is one of those nets.”

This work of creative nonfiction turned to aspects of the bread baking process – kneading, shaping and communion – to frame three lyric essays. Forgoing a linear narrative line to move in the associative manner of poems, each of these steps served to encompass broader themes of what I think contributes to a whole and healthy life: work, the body and the sacred. Bouncing between the science and technique of bread and personal experiences related to these broader themes, this work sought to answer the question, what can bread tell us about what makes a balanced and meaningful life?

(93 pages)
In 1944, three decades before the start of the artisanal bread movement, H. E. Jacob published *Six Thousand Years of Bread: Its Holy and Unholy History* capturing bread’s cultural, political, religious, and technological impacts over time. In the introduction of the 2007 edition of the text, prominent American baker Peter Reinhart wrote that bread is “inextricably woven into our cultural and personal histories.” Reinhart notes that while bread does have its own story, “it is also the medium through which so many other stories are told: stories of escape from bondage; of historical and political battles ...; of the intermingling of the supernatural and mystical into the natural world” (vi).

In the same way, *Artisan: On Bread and a Meaningful Life*, a collection of three nonfiction essays, utilizes aspects of the bread baking processing (kneading, shaping and communion) to explore and tell the author’s personal story with work, the body and the scared. Bouncing between the science and technique of bread and personal experiences related to these broader themes, this work sought to answer the question, what can bread tell us about what makes a balanced and meaningful life?
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Emerson James
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“Life goes on from moment to moment, experience to experience, and never seems to stop offering lessons for growth. What many people lack, though, is a way to tie these experiences into a meaningful whole, a context in which to experience the connectedness of all creation. Many of these potential life lessons slip past us because we do not have an adequate gathering net. For me, bread is one of those nets.”

- Peter Reinhart

*Crust and Crumb*

**Introduction**

It is the fall of 2009, my first week of college. I am sitting behind a narrow, blacktopped lab table in the front row of one of the basement classrooms in Melhorn Hall, McPherson College’s science building. The long sides of the rectangular room are lined with wooden drawers and glass-paned cabinets. The building that once housed McPherson city’s natural history museum still has an unusually large number of samples and specimens. A few of the drawers have been pulled open, revealing jar after jar of rocks and minerals, many of them meteorites collected by famed McPherson College professor Harvey Nininger, said to be the father of meteor science. Visible through the glass cabinets are the college’s reptile and amphibian collection – frogs so perfectly preserved in formaldehyde they look as though they could open their eyes and hop around the classroom if only you unscrewed the lid to their jar and exposed them to the air.

Today is the first lab session of the introductory biology class I am enrolled in. Despite the room filling up with students, it remains quiet as we wait for Dr. Frye to appear. During the first lecture period the day before, Dr. Frye had established himself as
a formidable presence. It wasn’t that there was anything intimidating about his small five-foot-six stature, dressed in khaki pants and a short-sleeved button up. It was that you could hear, in the seriousness in which he talked about science, his belief in its power and possibility. He expected that you invest yourself in this discovery. “To understand anything, you have to be able to describe it completely,” he said. “How much you understand depends on how closely you choose to look.”

I am not sure what I anticipated when he came through the door, balancing a cloth-covered basket atop a stack of books, his arms stretching to hold them all. Maybe I thought we’d be given magnifying glasses to help us look more closely at the objects around us. Or perhaps that we would focus on describing our observations, the first step towards understanding. Instead, Dr. Frye emphasized biology as the science of life, suggesting that anything that contributed to it, including eating, was a path to understanding. When he passed around the stack of books, he revealed science of a different kind: cookbooks. Inside the basket, kept warm underneath the towel, was freshly baked bread. Of the books circulating the lab, *Crust and Crumb: Master Formulas for Serious Bread Bakers* found its way into my hands. After a quick scan of the preface, I asked Dr. Frye if I could borrow the book drawn as I was to the philosophy of life the author argued was embodied in bread. Dr. Frye not only agreed, but offered an invitation, significant and lifelong, to go beyond reading and try doing, to come over to his house to bake.

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As the time since I was a student at McPherson College grows, so does my gratitude for the education that I received there. A small liberal arts college that then had
just 640 students, what McPherson College lacked in rigor it made up for in personal relationship. Of the many ways that I was individually cared for, it is all of the weeks that I baked with Dr. Frye, who quickly became Jonathan, that remain most vivid and continue to shape me.

Bread baking is an art of managing time and honoring process. A loaf of bread with an airy crumb, crunchy crust, and complex flavor might take days to develop, several hours to complete the whole process of baking. Much of that time is not labor but waiting and leaving the dough alone. After first mixing and kneading bread dough, it is often left to rest for hours, rising and gaining volume. Then, a baker might form the loaves and leave them to rise again before putting them in the oven. The first time I went over to Jonathan’s house to bake, he already had two batches of dough for the French Boule on that afternoon’s menu prepared when I arrived. Jonathan wanted me to be able to experience the full process without the logistical challenge of needing to wait the hours in between. So, he had prepared in advance a batch of dough that had completed its first rise and was ready to be formed, and a batch of dough that he’d formed into loaves and had just about completed its second rise and was ready to be baked.

Ever a balanced teacher, Jonathan didn’t want me to miss the real work of bread. The flour, salt and yeast still on the counter, he had me mix a third batch of dough and then demonstrated the appropriate technique for kneading; rising up on his toes, the heel of his palm pressed into the dough, the weight of his body causing the dough to squash forward and flatten. He then folded the dough back towards himself giving it a simultaneous quarter turn. He made it look easy and instinctive, like how someone unconsciously runs their hand through their hair, but I found my own hands and body to
be clumsy when it was my turn. Jonathan actually laughed a little at my effort and said, “You knead this dough for fifteen minutes. You’ll get better.”

As I finished kneading, Jonathan slipped the formed loaves into the oven and we sat down at the kitchen table and chatted while we waited. From time to time Jonathan’s wife Leslie would appear from her home office down the hall, called by the aromas released as the crust browned, a clue that the bread was almost ready for eating. When the timer beeped, none of us could wait the recommended 20 minutes for the bread to cool before cutting into the loaf.

Those first slices of bread I ate at Jonathan’s were no doubt tasty and satisfying, but it is not the flavors or pleasures of the bread that stick with me. Instead it is that without obligation or requirement, Jonathan opened his life to and invested in me. Over the years that we baked together, Jonathan provided a window for me to witness one of the ways he had incorporated in his own life the values and application of environmental stewardship and science that he was teaching me in a formalized setting in the classroom: there are underlying laws and phenomenon governing the universe, the world is fundamentally relational, and that creation can only remain healthy and giving (us included) through an ethic of tending and love.

Thus, bread for me has never really been about bread the food. Instead, bread encompassed and translated the academic framework of environmental stewardship that articulated what made the world healthy into a way for me to personally find health and meaning in my own life through a paralleled attention to process, relationship and care.
Having since navigated life unsheltered, I had three experiences that pulled me away from my belief in, and ability to enact, a life committed to process, relationship and care.

A few years after graduating, I found myself working for Utah State University’s Office of Research and Graduate Studies as a writer highlighting the research of USU’s faculty and students. We easily fall into the flow and trajectory of the environments in which we place ourselves. The Project Management and Communications (PMC) Team had a diverse portfolio of outreach and communications projects, including several large-scale events like the university’s TEDx program and a week-long celebration of research initiatives. My job was focused on strategy, extensive analysis and required intense periods of work that strove for an almost impossible standard of excellence. In addition, serving USU’s administrative offices meant constantly facing university politics and bureaucracy. Nestled deep within a hierarchy of administrators with their own agendas, the job felt more and more like a tactical game of power in a fictitious world and became harder and harder for me to fit within my values. It didn’t seem to matter that I brought good intentions to the work that I did, believing it to be in service of others; somebody else’s trajectory and goals would always trump mine. And so, amid a bunch of upheaval surrounding university politics, tired and frustrated, I quit.

It was also during this time of my life that I found myself in a polarized partnership; the highs and joys of my relationship made me feel like I was breaking into another realm of living, but the lows crippled and harmed me. I’d met my then partner, M., at a local Buddhist Sangha. Our relationship developed in tandem with my own spiritual opening and grew alongside that of the community of Sangha members who
helped cultivate a new framework for meeting the world. I had come to the practice out of an intense yearning to be able to have and fully experience the range of human feelings, and M., an artist and musician, expressed quite intensely the full breadth of the human condition. M. often floated between states of radiant joy and creativity to pointed places of anger, sadness and depression. She vocalized a recognition of these swings, shared about her mother’s untreated bipolar disorder that led to her being hit as a child and the scar it left: not a physical one, but perhaps something worse, an unseen sense that her very being was threatened, was somehow destined to be undeserving of love.

This, in context with my own early history with mental health – a childhood diagnosis of depression and bipolar disorder for which I was medicated, despite my wishes, for more than a decade – made attractive M.’s alternative narrative of softening, tending to and opening the heart. I can see now that I wanted to hold space for her suffering in part to prove my own hard-earned stability and because in seeing so much of myself in her, it felt that if I could stand by, accept and love her darkness and unpredictability that I could in turn redeem, accept and love those aspects in myself. Her verbal abuse was one thing to bear, but when M. hit me one December night it became clear that love cannot hold space for everything and I walked away.

For a long time, it was my body itself that served as my refuge: a place intimate, personal and within my control. Regardless of what was happening externally in my life, I could always escape through long hikes in nature or miles on my bicycle. The lines of ridges and pavement would roll past in a soft blur that marked my progress and made me feel capable and strong. But, as a result of a thyroid condition, my body began to express dysfunction, too. I was exhausted most of the time, lost a lot of weight, and, at times,
would become so light headed upon standing that I’d fall over. Even my body was efforting to a point of depletion. The hyperactive nodule on the left side of my thyroid was large enough that, at the recommendation of my doctor, I allowed this part of me to be cut out, too.

For me, my first craft and art were bread, and so, when I found myself disoriented and confused, it seemed the place to return to in order to remember and remake what makes life meaningful and satisfying. Thus, I sought to answer what can bread teach us about what it means to have a balanced and meaningful life.

**Intersection of Research and Works**

Given the importance of attending to process in both bread baking and life, my thesis explores three steps of the bread backing process: kneading, shaping, and communion. Each of these steps frames and metaphorically informs one essay and encompasses broader themes of what I think contributes to a whole and healthy life: work, the body, and the sacred.

In the introduction to *We Might as Well Call It the Lyric Essay* John D’Agata writes that the lyric essay “eschews the story-driven ambitions of fiction and nonfiction for the associative inquiry of poems” (7). The anthology features fifteen different essays, each featuring their own form. Some borrow structures from other types of texts (outlines, scientific reports, pain scales), whereas others utilize white space to allow the reader to fill in the gap.

Given that this project committed to have an element of bread appear in each essay, cleaving time and space, I adopted the lyric form for each essay of my thesis so
that the content could move by association and take different forms on the page.

Although I hope that each essay can stand alone as a single piece, a more wholistic picture is gained when read as a collection. A work that explores different types of essays untied together by a common thread is Jennifer Sinor’s *Letters Like the Day: On Reading Georgia O’Keeffe*. Common to the nine essays in *Letters Like the Day* is Sinor’s experience of reading Georgia O’Keeffe’s letters. Because each essay effectively utilizes its own form, Sinor is able to bounce around the timeline of both O’Keeffe and her own life as I did in my own work.

To inform each essay, I researched three areas: (1) the history, cultural context and techniques associated with bread (2) themes of environmental stewardship, place and good work and (3) examples of different creative nonfiction forms.

*Work – “Kneaded”*

The first essay of my thesis, “Kneaded,” explores the significance of the year I spent as a live-in apprenticeship and cheesemaker at a small micro-dairy in Northern Utah, the Rockhill Creamery. My desire to work on the farm was significantly influenced by my education in Environmental Stewardship, particularly the work of agrarian writer Wendell Berry. At the time (and still) Berry has shaped my sense of good work, healthy communities and relationship to place.

In the six decades that Berry has written, his work has remained centered around our connection, responsibility to and love of place and its creatures. Three of Berry’s essays – “The Pleasure of Eating,” “Health is Membership,” and “It All Turns on Affection” – articulate important ideas present in “Kneaded.”
In “The Pleasures of Eating,” Berry points out all of the ways that the industrialized food system disconnects people from food’s source: land and living creatures. As he reasserts that eating is an agricultural act, he makes the argument that how it is that we view and value our food and our desire and willingness to invest in the process of its production parallels our interest and value in life itself. For Berry, the argument that a faster meal provided by the industrial food system grants us more time to work and recreate ourselves as we are “hell bent on increasing the ‘quality’ of our lives,” reveals a “remarkable obliviousness to the causes and effects, the possibilities and the purposes, of the life of the body in this world” (323).

Picking up this question of the true economics of convenience, Berry asks in the essay “Health is Membership,” “What is the point of ‘labor saving’ if by making work effortless we make it poor, and if by doing poor work we weaken our bodies and lose conviviality and health?” (148). For Berry, health is based on wholeness, “not just in the completeness of ourselves but also in the sense of belonging to others and to place” (144). Further, Berry states that “the way to respect the body is to honor fully its materiality. … Our bodies are involved in the world. Their needs and desires and pleasures are physical. Our bodies hunger and thirst, yearn toward other bodies, grow tired and seek rest, rise up rested, eager to exert themselves” (146). It is noteworthy that Berry came to write “Health is Membership” as a means to make sense of his experience of his brother John’s illness and hospitalization. What Berry finds incomprehensible is how the mechanicalized hospital intended to promote healing so often fails to consider love.
Berry’s message of an ethic of love has continued to solidify over the decades that he has written. When asked to give a Jefferson Lecture in 2012, one of the highest honors for intellectual achievement in the humanities, Berry presented the essay, “It All Turns on Affection.” In part a meditation on those who find love for the place they are and choose to stay and those who leave with the hope of better things, “It All Turns on Affection” claims the affection that ultimately leads to someone staying is dependent upon imagination.

... imagination thrives on contact, on tangible connection. For humans to have a responsible relationship to the world, they must imagine their places in it. To have a place, to live and belong in a place, to live from a place without destroying it, we must imagine it. By imagination we see it illuminated by its own unique character and by our love for it. By imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place (14).

Thus, Berry’s writing establishes a precedent and makes physical the fact that a meaningful life is contingent on the depth of relationship one has to place and people and their ability to embody and make physical care, tending and love.

Just as bread dough is kneaded, as I work to understand the push and pull between the hardship and satisfaction of the work and relationships I embodied at Rockhill, specifically my relationship with my boss, Pete, some of Berry’s lines are directly incorporated in “Kneaded.” Most of Berry’s ideas, however, are encompassed by short sections of text that articulate the process and function of kneading itself. For example, following the first scene of the essay I include these lines:

To me, one of the most unique and important aspects of bread baking is its tactile nature. In asking you to mix the dough by hand, I am asking you to think of your hand as an implement. Mixing by hand is easier than using a mixer, is fully effective, and teaches you to feel the dough (Forkish 3).
Modeled on Jennifer Sinor’s essay, “More Feeling Than Brain,” where Sinor pairs scenes of personal experience with lines from Georgia O’Keeffe’s letters to guide the reader’s understanding of the narrative line, the sections on kneading inform the reader through association as to the significance of each Rockhill scene.

Where Sinor relies on a single voice, that of O’Keeffe, the language of kneading comes from cookbooks – The Book of Bread, The Bread Bible: 300 Favorite Recipes, Crust and Crumb: Master Formulas for Serious Bread Bakers, and Flour Water Salt Yeast: The Fundamentals of Artisan Bread and Pizza – speaking the philosophies of the four bakers who wrote them. In this essay, I work to knead, or integrate, them all.

The Body – “Tear”

In “A Braided Heart,” an essay that uses the baking and braiding of challah bread as its central metaphor, Brenda Miller describes the lyric essay as “a collage, a montage, or mosaic … disjunctive, paratactic, segmented and sectioned” (16). Pointing towards the lyric’s essay’s fragmentation Miller states that the lyric “invites the reader [and writer] into those gaps, that emphasizes what is unknown rather than what is already know” (16). The form allows the writer to juxtapose images that arise organically and intuitively, merging the inner world through personal narrative, with external ideas and threads of thought.

My second essay, “Tear,” began with a desire to understand a newfound and fanatic practice of distance running that arose in tandem with an encompassing bout of depression. At the time of writing the essay, I worked at Crumb Brothers Artisan Bread (where I worked for six months as a pastry chef and six months making bread,
recognizing the importance of direct experience with one’s material for metaphors and meaning to emerge). As a former, I shaped hundreds of loaves of bread each week, allowing me to engage with the aspect of the bread backing process intended to inform this essay on the body.

When I first began writing, I didn’t see the connection between distance running, my emotional landscape and the shaping of bread, so I adopted the sectioned format that Miller utilized in both “A Braided Heart” and “A Thousand Buddhas” to allow the scenes of running and moments of shaping that naturally emerged to sit side-by-side on the page. The shaping of loaves revealed the dough’s organic ability to maintain strength and balance in response to environmental conditions through release and rest, whereas my practice of distance running demonstrated an attempt to contain and exert in response to the state of depression that surrounded me.

In the craft piece “The Shared Space Between Reader and Writer: A Case Study,” Miller writes that by allowing the form to dictate the content the writer can “get out of their own way,” and therefore, “bypass what … [they] already determined as ‘their story’ and instead become open and available.” This ability to get out of my own way proved important in discovering the actual subject of “Tear.” As I contemplated the disparity between the two responses outlined on the page, I found myself posed with an interesting syllogism. If I believed the processes and responses of bread as a living and organic organism to represent the needs and responses of my own body (release and rest) then why was it that I was engaging in the opposite (containment and effort) through running. What opened in the essay was an investigation of how I have carried and coped with a childhood diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Through the essay, I was able to recognize how
associated narratives about the acceptability of my emotions and their expression led to a
fear of inhabiting my sensing body and a consequent repression of feelings.

In the introduction to *The Solace of Open Space*, Gretel Ehrlich explains that the
book, “originally conceived as a straight-through narrative” instead became a “riprap” in
which the “detours became the actual path; the digressions in the writing, the narrative”
(x). Instead of writing directly about her grief at the loss of a partner, she let her narrative
be held together by place, Wyoming, the landscape in which she was able to abide. It is
as though the landscape is speaking what Ehrlich cannot; that we are invariably subjected
to and weathered by circumstance and our environment, often stripped bare and left raw,
and that it is in this emptiness that we are purified and prepared to receive beauty and
honor the fullness of life. *The Solace of Open Space* provided me a model of how place
(or in the case of my thesis bread) and writing itself can embody what we cannot
approach directly, as was the case in considering my childhood in “Tear.”

*The Sacred – “Ancient”*

In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Robin Wall Kimmerer draws on her background as scientist and
member of the Citizen Band Potawatomi to braid together a cosmology of the world and
subsequent ethic to care for it that recognizes both the empirical and spiritual. Illustrated
repeatedly in *Braiding Sweetgrass* through Kimmerer’s science and personal narrative is
the idea of honorable harvest. “In order to live, I must consume,” writes Kimmerer.
“That’s the way the world works, the exchange of a life for a life, the endless cycling
between my body and the body of the world” (177). In describing her process of asking
permission of wild leeks to be harvested, Kimmerer touches a balance between the pragmatic and the sacred that I strove to discover for myself in my own experience with bread. “Asking permission shows respect for the personhood of the plant, but it is also an assessment of the well-being of the population. … The analytic left (brain) reads the empirical signs. … The intuitive right hemisphere is reading something else, a sense of the generosity, an open-handed radiance that says *take me.*” It is notable that Kimmerer acknowledges the “personhood of the plant,” recognizing the sentients and autonomy of the earth that we must take from to survive.

Similar to the indigenous perspective Kimmerer brings to *Braiding Sweetgrass,* Enrique Salmón explores the intersections between land, food and culture in his book *Eating the Landscape.* Drawing from his own Rarámuri culture, Salmón echoes many of the themes addressed by Berry and Kimmerer: the importance of participation in a reciprocal relationship with the land, the connection between each group's cultural identity and their ecosystems, and the correlation of land consciousness and food consciousness. What he adds is the idea that eating is not only a cultural act, but an act of memory that solidifies identity (Salmón 8).

While I read two historical accounts of the history of bread – H. E. Jacob’s *Six Thousand Years of Bread: Its Holy and Unholy History* and William Rubel’s *Bread: A Global History* – the two texts ultimately informed my thesis very little. What stood out in Jacob’s scholarship is that there is not much to be said about how bread as food has changed overtime. In fact, bread’s biggest development was the accidental discovery of leavening, some 6,000 years ago, when a curious Egyptian noticed that a forgotten bowl of porridge, left exposed to the air, had a new-found activity and decided to cook it over
the fire (Jacob 26). Despite marginal changes in technique, bread warrants its own volume because of the ways that humans have imbedded social, economic, cultural and spiritual significance in each loaf.

In the forward to the 2007 edition of the book, Peter Reinhart reinforces that bread is “inextricably woven into our cultural and personal histories.” He notes that while bread does have its own story, “it is also the medium through which so many other stories are told: stories of escape from bondage; of historical and political battles …; of the intermingling of the supernatural and mystical into the natural world” (vi).

What proved most illustrative of the relationship between bread, culture, the spiritual and the natural world was looking at it through the lens of folk art and material culture. In the spring of 2019, as part of a class on the subject, I wrote a research paper of the intersection of foodways and bread as an object of folk art and material culture. Where previous research recognized the expression of religious and ethnic identities through particular types of bread such as the challah or croissant (Steinber; Hopkin), my paper sought to explore the process of baking, from the procurement of materials to the eating of the loaf and the unique perspective and philosophy that bakers add to our cultural and spiritual understanding of ourselves. Upon learning about the work of Don Guerra, an artisanal baker in Tucson, Arizona who has received recognition (including a James Beard Award) for his work with local heritage grains, I went to Tucson to interview him.

During our two-hour conversation, three themes or areas of emphasis emerged in Don’s work. At its center was his attention to the craft and technique of bread baking, what Don called the “economic engine.” But more important to him was his relationship
and commitment to place (enacted through his restoration and cultivation of a local grain, Sonora Wheat) and the community he fed. Don embodied what foodways scholar Lucy M. Long wrote in the introduction to the *Food and Folklore Reader*,

> Food connects us all. It connects individuals to their past, places, and other people as well as to the larger culture and society surrounding them. … Through its production and procurement, food connects us to the earth, physical spaces, and the natural cycles; and access to and distribution of food is shaped by and connected to politics, economics, religion and every other construction of human kind (1).

This relationship between our larger culture and the connection to the earth became foundation in the final essay of my thesis.

“Ancient,” emerged from three encounters with whales: one dead, one that I chased, and one that I believe came to me. With Kimmerer’s ideas of asking and reciprocity in mind, juxtaposed with my pilgrimage to meet Don and the example he provided of what a dedicated life to renewal and creation can manifest, I came to see that each encounter with the whales encapsulated the evolution of my relationship and response to the earth, it’s pain and offering.

In the essay “Tallgrass,” written for the Remembrance Day for Lost Species, Kimmerer writes, “I refuse to write a eulogy for one alone, because the very notion of separability is at the root of the crisis we have created. The life of one is inseparable from the life of another. Our work is not to eulogies them, but to fuel the fires of renewal.”

I now can see now that the grief I felt and subsequent turning away from the environmental loss surrounding us served to eulogize something that was not already dead or absent. It was an action that came from an ideology of lack. For me, the most important scene of “Ancient” is when I bow before the whale
vertebrae: mind grounded, heart higher, womb highest. Hands pressed to ancient
marrow, I trust in regeneration.

**Conclusion**

When I first articulated my thesis question, what can bread teach us about
what makes a balanced and meaningful life, I was skeptical that I would come to
the end of my thesis with clear answers; I really just wanted a reason to bake
again. In the way that the universe has a sense of humor, writing about bread grew
my intellectual knowledge, but did not lead to more baking. Even when I worked
at Crumb Brothers, because of the scale of production, my role was limited to
forming: I didn’t bake a single loaf. For a long time, I’d dreamed about working
at a professional bakery, but while there I often found myself just as replaceable
and frustrated as when I worked at the university. Instead, I was happiest when
writing about cheese, about Rockhill, the space in my life I have been most able
to attend to process, relationship and care.

As a result of my thesis, I know, with certainty, that I am a maker. I also
know that for me, it is not enough to know just one part of the process; I want to
see the whole picture, beginning to end. This, of course, isn’t always possible, but
I recognize more clearly now how attention to scale and time give me more of a
chance to have an integrated life.

In a conversation hosted by the Schumacher Center for Economics
between Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson on the subject of homecoming, Berry
said:
Choosing a place is like choosing in any other relationship. Once the commitment is made, then I think you are eligible for certain rewards. I don’t think that they will be the ones you foresee, I don’t think they will come on a schedule prescribed by you, but I do think there will be rewards. Places have limits. Human relationships have limits. When you hit the limit, you think, ‘This is it, I’ll have to try for something else now.’ But you keep on. And then, somehow, the situation opens up and you begin to see more than you saw before.

This philosophy – make the commitment, the rewards will come, keep on – seems applicable not only to the process of writing my thesis, but to my continued writing practice, and for how I want to live my life.

In regards to my thesis, there were many moments where I wanted to move on from bread. That said, had I not had the constraints and incentives of the project I don’t know if I would have pursued professional baking experience, had the courage to drive to Tucson to talk with Don, or recognized how important Rockhill is to me. Though I have hit the time limit of the work I can do on the project for graduate school, I do not feel done with the collection. As they stand now, although doing interesting work, both “Tear” and “Ancient” leave the reader without a single idea or takeaway and therefore warrant revisions before pursuing publication. In addition, the proposed project entailed four essays (kneading, shaping, rising, and communion) where my thesis currently only has three. I would like to complete the fourth essay, rising, so that I, and the collection, address love.

At the onset of graduate school, I had not taken a single class in creative writing. I had, however, spent four years at Research and Graduate Studies where I wrote a tremendous amount only to watch, again and again, other people say the
sentences I’d labored over as if they were theirs. Even then, I knew that the
decision to leave my grown-up job and switch fields was a gift to myself. To
make sense of other people’s passions and experiences did not fulfill my long felt
pull towards language and writing; I needed to claim my own thoughts and
experiences and see what I was capable of. In the same way that I was drawn to
science and meditation for the ways in which these practices help us to slow down
and look, writing has become integrated into the way I see the world.

One of the first lessons I received on craft was that writing often comes
from one of three places: sound, sense or idea. It was pointed out to me then (and
is my propensity now) that my writing is driven by idea. I have noticed, however,
a shift in my writing as a result of three aspects of craft – attention to setting,
scene and verb. All three incline towards the physical and embodied. It did not
surprise me that attention to land, place and process were present in my thesis.
The degree I wrote about my own body did. Though not having an overt presence
in my thesis, and despite an androgynous and gender-neutral identity, I often
found myself thinking about my womb. This is an area I’d like to commit to
explore and see how in wrestling with it on the page, my understanding might
open.

In the larger arch of my life, I plan to stay here in Logan. I’d like to see the
ratio of bind weed to native plants in my yard switch, have a shed conversion to
writing space project to finish, people too dear to say goodbye to. Let’s just say, I
still feel like I have more looking and tending to do to be “eligible for certain
rewards.”
Works Cited


KNEADED

Consider time to be a powerful instrument in the baker’s toolkit. Recognizing time as a discrete and crucial element in a recipe is the first detail that sets the best bakers apart. If you manipulate time in proper balance [to other variables], you give yourself a chance to make something special.

Ken Forkish
*Flour Water Salt Yeast*

On the first day I found myself shoveling the corral at the Rockhill Creamery, a small micro dairy perched on the plateau that tables the foothills of northern Utah’s Bear River Range, I realized that I was going to learn a lot about what actually went into working on a small farm and making artisanal cheese.

That afternoon, the tires of my hatchback Toyota Yaris, packed with all of my possessions, crunched up the long gravel driveway. It only took me an hour and forty-five minutes to move and situate my stuff into the apartment where I’d live for the next year, the time I’d committed to serve as the farm’s live-in apprentice. The one room space was simple. At the heart of Rockhill’s dispersed infrastructure – sloping pastures, hay barn, corral, milk parlor, milk tank room, creamery, shop, granary, calf barn – the apartment sat above the aging cave, a vault of sorts where hundreds of wheels of cheese were stored and matured. The damage to months and months of labor, should a pipe burst and flood the cave was too great a risk, so the apartment lacked running water. The ability to live on the farm among the pastoral landscape and pine sided buildings, as well as Rockhill’s commitment to the entire process of cheese making from pasture to market, outweighed the short trip I had to take across the property to the calf barn that housed my bathroom.
and a large utility sink. “It’s a farm, not the fucking Waldorf Astoria” as Pete, one of Rockhill’s owners, would frequently remind.

My stuff transferred inside, I sat for a moment on my front step and traced the veins of the craggy mountains that seemed to rise straight up from the edge of the property and walled the eastern side of the valley. Fifty yards to my right, Pete’s tall skinny frame filled the door of his shop.

“Done already?” he asked as he raked his fingers through the mop of graying hair that topped his head making him look like the portrait of Andrew Jackson on a crisp twenty. “If you’re as simple and minimal as you seem, you’re going to do just fine here. The next test is if you can handle cow shit. No sense sitting. There are always things to do. Let’s go into Smithfield to the Imp to get you some coveralls and muck boots so you can get started.”

An hour or so later, I stood on a bare patch of concrete as sweat gathered around my hairline and underneath a stiff pair of overalls. Their denim, shades darker than the June sky, broadcast their newness. Despite the history of dairy farming in my family, four years of undergraduate study in Environmental Stewardship guided by agrarian writers like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson, and all of my romantic notions about making cheese, it was clear to me that I was as green to farming as the Key brand label stitched to the front of the coveralls that flagged my chest. All around me were piles of cow shit. My task was to scrape the corral floor clean and push the cow pies into the amassing pile of poop at one side of the corral. Once I had this done, Pete, would come in with his tractor and throw it over a tall wall into the manure pit before we let the cows down to a cleaned space for the evening milking.
“Young people bodies are up for the manual labor,” Pete said. “Come find me when you’re done,” and walked back over to his shop.

After just two or three passes with the large metal shovel, I was tired and overwhelmed by the area of the corral. My soft hands caught in the grain of the shovel’s wooden handle, early stages of blisters beginning to form. My back hurt from the hunch I’d assumed over the shovel, the end of its handle pressed into the small of my belly. As the poop gathered on the shovel’s surface, I had to put the entire weight of my body into it, pushing from my pelvis and hips, to get the shit to slide. I already preferred the dried-out cow pies. Not only were they less heavy, but they didn’t make me want to gag from their smell.

As I made my way further away from the feeding trough where the cows stand as they graze on hay during the milking, the amount of poop thinned and the effort required lessened. I got into more of a rhythm. There was an angle at which to hold the shovel that allowed its edge to skim the concrete. Just as I would start to feel a sense of satisfaction with myself for my determination and quick learning, the order and cleanliness that was gained with each pass of the shovel, its edge would catch on an unknown crack in the concrete and halt my forward momentum: the handle rammed into my belly.

Although physically demanding, shoveling doesn’t take much thought. I tried to convince myself of the nobility of the work with lines of Wendell Berry reeling through my head.

“What is the point of ‘labor saving’ if by making work effortless, we make it poor?” I asked myself.
“Vocation attaches to work a cluster of other ideas, including devotion, skill, pride, pleasure, the good stewardship of means and materials,” I reminded.

And yet, the neatness and ideals of years of reading didn’t quite match up with the slop of the actual work I was doing. It had only taken a few jabs to the gut for me to begin to doubt what I’d gotten myself into.

Mixing dough by hand may be new. ... One of the most unique and important aspects of bread baking is its tactile nature. In asking to mix the dough by hand, I am asking you to think of your hand as an implement. Mixing by hand is easier than using a mixer, is fully effective and teaches you feel. People have been mixing dough by hand for thousands of years. If our ancestors did it, we can. And if you haven’t done it before, I hope you get great satisfaction from the process and feel a connection to the past and the history of baking, like I do.

It was a Monday: a cheese make day. I stood attentive, my hand perched on the doorknob of the outer of two sets of windowed doors that foyered the main room of the creamery. My gaze was cast long to the milk tank room twenty-five yards across the property.

As is the case for all dairies, at Rockhill, we milked our six cows (Abi, Chole, Clara, Elsa, Inez and Ingrid) twice a day. Apart from this routine, however, Rockhill was an anomaly. Much as we like the notion of cute farms where the cows are named, the reality of the dairy business in the United States is one of mega dairies and machines: farms with 2,000 cows or more some of which milk their cows robotically. Over the last forty years, the number of these mega dairies has grown at a rate of 104%, leaving the average herd size at 234 cows. To be a small-scale dairy was a thing of the past and at Rockhill, we maintained old processes, such as multi-day milk storage and hauling milk by hand, to sustain the operation.
I waited for the sight of Pete shouldering open the door of the milk tank room, his hands loaded down by full five-gallon milk buckets. At my feet, I had two empty buckets, ready to trade for the full buckets he would soon transfer into my hands, the first of many exchanges required to fill the cheese making vat that glinted its empty, stainless steel clean. When Pete emerged from the milk tank room his face was set with focus, his arms flexed and locked, his steps slow and steady so as not to spill the precious commodity. I watched his face grimace as he climbed the three steps that ascend from the milk tank room. His back was hurting.

Before we started hauling milk that day, Pete had given me a terse reminder.

“When I’m two steps away from the creamery, open the door. Don’t make me stand there waiting.”

He didn’t want to have to hold the milk any longer than necessary.

Pete two steps away, I let me hand fall on the doorknob and pushed the door open. After twelve years of this routine every Sunday and Thursday, Pete’s body was choreographed. He planted his left foot and stepped his right foot forward his toes flexed to catch the door. I reached out and grazed Pete’s fingers as I wrapped my own around the milk buckets’ plastic handles. The moment Pete let go, my body clenched to hold the milk’s weight and I articulated an unconscious and airy “oof.”

Milk is heavy. Weighing 8.6 pounds per gallon each bucket amassed to some 40 pounds. To manage this load, I felt my neck and jaw clench as my shoulders were pulled down into their sockets.
Pete chuckled knowingly at my discomfort. “Don’t worry, with just a year here, you will head on your way before your arms dangle long at your sides like a monkey and you get the back of a cripple,” he joked.

We do not think, at least I did not think, about the effort that it took to convert and move raw materials. Or, if we do think, it is hard to conceptualize the true weight of that effort.

Each day our pasture was broken down by the steady hinge of mandible. Every morning and evening we collected six cows’ milk into custom, Italian made milk cans whose curves shined stainless. A body – Pete’s, mine, the high school boys who milked Saturdays – hinged from the waist hoisting the loaded cans from the milk parlor to milk tank room and then hang-cleaned those cans to our chest so their contents could be poured and stored in the tank. Bucketed from tank to vat, the milk was heated and stirred, coagulated to curd that was cooked, stirred more, and scooped into molds – all by hand. Pressed and brined, that milk, now wheels of cheese, was lifted, moved underground to the cool cave, to wooden boards to be aged. Months later (anywhere from two to twenty-four), unearthed and returned to the light, the cheese pungent and sharp was cut and packaged. Pasture again ready for consumption. Years later, I still marvel at having touched every step of the process, the satisfaction of bringing a cracker with a slice of cheese I made to my mouth.

On that morning, though, it took eleven trips to fill the one-hundred-and-ten-gallon vat: nearly a thousand pounds of milk moved.
Later that day I saw Pete hunched forward, ape-like as he walked around the property. Peaking above the top of his Levi’s was the bright blue of the two ice packs he had shoved down his pants.

*Techniques for kneading are unique to each baker: some push, some press, some squeeze, some slam. Some are gentle, others are vigorous. If you are happy with the consistency of your dough and satisfied with the finished loaves, then you are doing a good job.*

Four weeks into my apprenticeship, I had a horrendous milking followed by an unnerving altercation with Pete.

For a practiced milker, it takes about three and half hours to feed the calves, shovel the corral and milk Rockhill’s six girls. Four weeks in, I was still stunted and slowed by my need to think through each step. My body didn’t yet know and I didn’t yet see all the small details – how to loop the hoses on the milk cans to keep the inflations from getting tangled, to do small tasks like wash rags and fill the teat cleaning bucket with soapy water in the down time while the milker did the work. There was no order to how I disassembled the full cans between each milking to empty their contents into the tank. I couldn’t remember which cleaning chemicals to add when, if I needed hot water or cold. The inefficiencies every step of the way added up. What should have taken an hour and forty-five minutes took me three.

On that particular night, hyper focused on hooking an inflation up to Elsa who, irritable and in heat, had tried to kick me twice, I’d ignored the slow release of air coming out of Clara’s butthole, a courtesy toot of warning of the deluge of poop to follow.

The milker finally on Elsa, I stepped around her to add weights to the claw that pulsated under Clara only to be greeted with the slap of poop hitting the concrete floor.
Shit splattered everywhere: the walls and ceiling spackled, the light bulbs flecked, strands of my coveralls and hair lacquered in green glop. When I opened my eyes, it had even beaded on the end of my eyelashes.

The extra time to hose down the milk parlor (and myself) between rounds set me back another hour and so, despite being mid-July, one of the longest days of light in Utah, I saw the moon slip above the precipice that crowned the mountain, when I finally retreated to the apartment. I’d not filled a pot with water to boil some pasta before I heard the crunch of gravel underneath Pete’s stride as he approached my door. He let the heft of the horse shoe knocker fall heavy with each rap.

Pete didn’t even wait for me to answer the door before he spoke.

“Are you in for the night?” he asked.

“Yes, just making myself some dinner,” I said as the door hinged open.

“Why didn’t you feed the cows up top?” he accused, anger and the bite of beer on his breath meeting my senses.

“I did,” I answered, uncomfortable with his outburst. “Three barrels.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Pete barked. “That’s bullshit. There’s no hay up in the trough and you didn’t cut open another bail.”

“I don’t like being called a liar, nor how you’re talking to me,” I said defensively, my patience tried from an evening already fully of shit. I did not like that he had intruded on my home space. “I made sure to sweep up all of the loose hay since we were at the end of the bail. It was just enough. I thought that I was doing a good job.”
“Everyone knows that lose hay isn’t knit as tight, so it takes up more volume, but is mostly air,” Pete countered. “Just because you had a long milking doesn’t mean you can cut corners.”

“I wasn’t trying to cut corners. I just didn’t know, Pete” I said wounded by the directness of his accusations, trying to hold back tears. “I can come out and throw more hay.”

“Don’t bother,” Pete said. “I already did it myself. I can’t risk my animals dying because you’re unreliable. Do your job better from now on,” he added poking his finger at me before he walked away.

I turned to go back in the apartment and closed the door hard, the horse shoe knocker slamming one last time. I felt belittled and trapped. I did not like that with my home at the center of the farm, Pete could pound on my door whenever a burst of anger rose in him. I did not like that I could not retreat and walk away.

For best results [kneading by hand] the counter should be at about the same height as your waist. You want to be able to put your body into the motion of kneading, from the shoulder down. It’s not just an exercise for hands. Keep the dough close to you: reaching across the table is hard on the back.

As the months of my apprenticeship wore on, I watched my body change. The daily lifting of heavy milk cans and milk buckets, hours of stirring a vat full of curd each week, the hoisting and sliding out of wooden boards loaded with wheels of cheese that needed to be flipped and cleaned, grew and sculpted the muscles of my lanky and slight arms in a way that years of lifting in a weight room had failed to do.

My hands kept time as the top of my palms developed their own topographies of ever thickening callouses.
One December day, Jennifer (Rockhill’s other owner) and I were coming to the end of a cheese make. The milk had been warmed and transformed into curd. The curd had been cooked, stirred and scooped into nine hoops lined with cheese clothes. The soon-to-be wheels of cheese, bundled and held in their forms sat arranged side-by-side in two neat lines on the drain table waiting to be pressed. In this step, weight is added to each wheel of cheese to help expel any reaming whey and encourage the curd to knit together forming a melded mass of cheese.

While some cheese making operations have expensive fancy presses, at Rockhill we relied on weight and gravity: five-gallon buckets filled with gravel and sand, fifty pounds each. To prevent injury to my back, I had learned to squat to the floor and first, lifting with my legs, bring the buckets from their shelf to the counter top and then execute a second lift from the counter up and over the wall of the drain table onto the wheel of cheese. The buckets, however, had little to hold onto except for a narrow lip with which to clutch with clawed fingers.

On my seventh bucket, my fingers, dried out from months of cleaning chemicals and the biting winter temperatures, split under the strain of gripping the narrow lip. The plastic bit into the now exposed nerves of my fingertips causing a piercing pain that instructed my fingers to released their hold. Instinct counteracted instinct, and I lurched to catch the bucket I had dropped a second before.

Seeing my blunder and grimace, Jennifer asked, “What happened?”

“My fingers and palms split,” I said holding up my cracked and bloodied hands. “The surprise of it caused the bucket to slip. When I caught it, I think I tweaked my back.”
“Oh no,” Jennifer said. “Not your back, too. Once they are hurt they are hard to heal.”

A couple hours later when I had finished cleaning the creamery, there was a stack of items on my front step: a lime green container of O’Keefe’s Working Hands Cream, two bright blue ice packs, a PBR and a note from Pete.

“Jennifer said you split your hands and tweaked your back. Miracle green cream morning, evening and any time after you’ve used the cleaning chemicals. Ice on for twenty off for twenty as often as you can stand it. Try not to sit for too long. Your back will cease. More beer: it helps.”

Jennifer was right, whereas my hands healed up pretty quickly, my back remained vulnerable to the slightest mis-lift, easily falling into a state of pain and spasm. The inflexibility of farm tasks meant that all of our backs were constantly taxed; injury and fatigue led to poor form or additional strain, which led to re-injury. Sometimes my back would flair up so badly that I could not sit up from bed, but instead had to throw my legs over the side and roll off to stand.

Unlike Pete and Jennifer who had been in this cycle for years, I only experienced this for a couple of months. I could see how this could wear you down. As the months wore on, I watched my idealism about the value of the food we made wane as my body’s tired increased. Come the end of my apprenticeship in May, I was grateful for the opportunity to do something different.

I came out on the other side with a firm love of the baker’s craft, acknowledging it as much more hard work than romance. The daily rhythms of life as a professional baker, once nearly overwhelming, now provide comfort.
Although I did go, I couldn’t stay away. The summer after my apprenticeship at Rockhill, I pedaled a 4,600-mile bicycle tour, spanning the country from Virginia to Oregon, only to find myself back in Cache Valley. In the year that I had spent on the farm, I worked six days a week for all but a single four-day vacation around Christmas and a week when I had to have my tonsils removed. The extended vacation on my bicycle had me convinced that I wanted a job distinctly separate from my home life that would afford me time off and that was of the mind as opposed to the body. Interested in returning to my scientific roots and pursuing writing, I took a job as a content writer in a communications office at Utah State University where I translated researcher’s findings into stories that could be understood by the lay public.

I’d not been back in the valley for a week when I received a text message from Pete.

“Can’t have you get brainwashed by those university fuckers. I’m adding you to the milking schedule. How about Friday night? You’d be doing my back a favor. We’ll send you home with a couple of packages of cheese.”

In the three months of distance that I had from the farm, my appreciation for it had deepened. It took my back almost two months to completely heal. I recognized that, so long as Pete and Jennifer continued the dairy and cheese making operations, they would never have this much time to recover; they worked six days a week, too. Even on their day off, they were still responsible. They had found a way for their home and livelihoods to be integrated, to be their own bosses, but in doing so lost other freedoms. After I spent seventy days riding my bicycle I was acquainted in a new way to the perseverance it takes to get up and do same thing day in and day out. I thought about
Wendell Berry’s idea of boomers and stickers. Boomers have kept moving west, motivated by greed and believing there to be something better. Stickers, however, are “motivated by affection, by such love for a place and its life that they want to preserve it and remain in it.” I thought about how my relationship with Pete had grown, dare I say my affection for him.

When I lived on the farm, things weren’t always comfortable, especially with Pete. Shortly after our first confrontation over feeding the cows, I approached him while he was customizing the gearing on a new trials bicycle he was building in the shop.

“Can I talk to you about something?” I asked from the door frame.

“If you have to,” Pete said sliding his reading glasses off his eyes and letting them dangle around his neck.

“I didn’t appreciate how you talked to me the other night.”

“I’m your boss and responsible for this place” he interrupted. “I have the right to tell you when you’ve done a bad job.”

“You are my boss,” I said. “And you do have the right to correct my work. I don’t have a problem that you said something. I’m telling you I didn’t like how you said it.”

“It seemed direct and to the point to me,” Pete said. “I said what I needed to say. It’s not a problem anymore. I’m not holding it against you. Why don’t you just let it go?”

“Sure, you were mad. You got to tell me you were mad, but it didn’t make me respect you or want to do good work for you. It made me think you were an asshole.” I said.

Pete put down the bicycle chain he’d been tinkering with a little surprised. He’d never heard me swear before.
“I’m a good worker and am committed to doing a good job here. You’ll get a lot more out of me if you’re kinder in your correction. And, I know this place is yours, but it is my home, too. In the same way you and Jennifer don’t like for people to come down to the house on Wednesdays when it’s your day off, I want boundaries around my home space, too. I’m your employee, but I’m also your neighbor. I am going to be here for a year. I’d prefer not to hate you by the end of it.”

“We might be neighbors, but I am still your boss. I’m not into this peace and love bullshit. Ask any apprentice who has lived here, I’m a lot nicer and gladly your friend once you don’t work for me.”

“I’m not asking you to be my friend. I’m asking you to treat me like an adult and with respect.”

Pete looked up at the clock. “It’s time to milk,” he said. “You’d better go.”

But Pete, for all of his gruffness and dismissal, was a sticker. After buying the run-down farm in 1986 he’d restored five of its buildings. Then he tried venture after venture (raising calves, laying tile, a small engine repair business) to keep the farm a working operation before successfully starting the cheese business with Jennifer in 2005. Pete wanted a life built on his own attention to land and creatures, one of place and process, one where as his own boss he got to decide the success of his own effort. He’d stuck with it and he’d stuck with me. I wanted to be a sticker, too.

Upon Pete’s request, I was quick to say yes to being on the milking schedule twice. In fact, I’d be on the milking schedule twice a month for a Friday-evening, Saturday-morning milking for five years after my apprenticeship. I said yes every time Pete asked until we no longer had cows to milk.
Pete always said that I was doing him a favor, “That’s four milkings a month I don’t have to worry about,” but he was really giving to me. As I flitted about for years in different jobs (as a worship coordinator at a local church, in project management and communications at the university, even in graduate school) where I was trying to fit into someone else’s system or structure, someone else’s definition of success, I was always happiest when I could take off those identities and slip into my coveralls. I was soothed by the rhythm of the pulsator, the silence of the cows. At the farm, I saw what we made. It was clear what needed to be done.

If you have a large standing electric mixer with a dough hook attachment, it will do the job of mixing and kneading for you quickly and efficiently. You may miss the satisfying pleasure that comes from slapping the dough around and kneading it, but there are times when you’ll more than welcome the help that a modern appliance can give.

I sat in the shop in my coveralls eating toasted almonds and drinking a PBR with Pete. I’d gotten up to the farm from my job late, but he’d insisted the chores and cows could wait.

“I’ve got some news,” Pete said once I’d settled into one of the dust covered desk chairs. “We’ve started to the process of sourcing milk elsewhere. We’re going to sell the cows.”

“Wow,” I said, a little shocked. The cows had been the foundation of the business for years. Not only did they govern time, but the fact that we milked them right on the property was a key element to the Rockhill brand and identity. I’d asked Pete about getting milk from somewhere else before to which he responded, “Why the hell would we do that? Sounds like business suicide to me.”

“What made you decide that now was the best time to sell?” I asked.
“I didn’t. Sara told me that if she was going to continue to move towards being an owner of the business, we needed to change some things,” he said matter of factly.

Preceding me as an apprentice in 2012, Sara remained steadily involved in the business and became a co-owner/operator of the Rockhill Creamery in 2018. At sixty-seven, Jennifer, the center of the cheesemaking operation was rightfully ready to transition out of her responsibilities to the business and retire. Sara recognized how much the ability to maintain both Rockhill’s dairy and cheesemaking operations depended on the proximity of the business to Pete and Jennifer’s home and that they sacrificed so much of their lives to put the business first. As their bodies aged, it became clear that Rockhill either needed more help or needed to eliminate some responsibilities. Apparently, when Sara approached Pete and Jennifer about either hiring more support or reducing the number of responsibilities, they’d decided together to let the cows go. Everyone needed a little more flexibility to remain happy and healthy.

“If the Rockhill Creamery is going to survive and there’s a possibility for new owners as Jennifer and I transition out of the business” Pete said, “We can’t keep the cows.”

My mind flipped through logistical questions about the change that was coming: where would they get the milk from? Where would the cows go? How would they tell customers? But then the questions became more personal. What would Pete do? While the cows had been the center of the cheese making operation, they were also a significant foundation to Pete’s social life. The need for them to be milked brought up folks like me, other former apprentices and local teenagers. And, I wondered what I would do. Rockhill had been my longest commitment, the thing I kept in my life that always made me feel
ground, that my values of environmental stewardship and small community were actually possible.

The week before the cows were sold, worried about his sense of purpose, I asked Pete, “Do you think you’ll miss milking at all?”

“Fuck no,” he said kicking some gravel with the chunky toe of his muck boot. “What will there be to miss about being kicked and shit on? You’re not going to miss them bitches, are you?”

“Very much” I said looking him in the eye. “I love milking cows. It is the most honest work I’ve ever done.”

Pete stopped walked and turned to face me. “You know, Sara’s a really good partner. Maybe you should think about buying into the business.”

_The ball of ingredients will change before your eyes from a coarse mixture into a smooth, soft, elastic and springy dough._

My phone buzzed.

Pete’s name appeared on my home screen.

“It’s the fucking Waldorf Astoria!” the preview of the text message read with a small miniature icon of a picture he had sent. I swiped right to look at the image. It was a picture of a large, walled, pop-up tent. Its ceiling tall enough that Pete, at six-foot three, could stand up in it. Inside was a king-sized inflatable mattress. The rest of his message read, “It’s the start of our new life.”

Pete must have sold the cows.
I wanted Pete to know that just because the cows were gone, I wasn’t. That the relationship with him was just as, more, important than the cows and the type of work and life they represented.

“Will you be around this afternoon?” I replied. “Those look like some pretty fancy digs that I’ll need to come check out.”

“Come up anytime,” he said.

As I walked between the outside of the shop and the lilac bushes to Pete and Jennifer’s yard, Daisy, Pete’s border collie, sounded my presence with a rolling bark.

“Who’s that?” came Pete’s voice from the tent. “Is that Emily?” he asked dropping the i and turning my name into two syllables: Em-lee.

I came around the bush to find him with his tent set up in the shade, blasting rock music on a new blue tooth speaker as he layed in the middle of the king-sized mattress, his high-top Vans hanging off the end, with a PBR resting on his chest.

“Lay down kid and take in the good life,” Pete said scooting over. I thought to myself how far we’d come.

“Sell the cows?” I asked.

“Sure did.” Pete said without opening his eyes. “Still had the worst milking of my life this morning though. I helped Mark because I knew it’d be a raucous integrating them into his herd.”

Mark was the owner of the Cache Meadow Creamery, a small dairy ten miles north of Rockhill where we’d sold the cows and would be sourcing our milk.

“I’d still choose it over some of the nonsense you do in graduate school,” he poked.
“Pete, I know a lot of its bullshit, but I’m doing it for me,” I said.

“I just worry about you, kid. You seem stressed,” he said with an unprecedented tenderness. He turned his head in my direction and opened his eyes. “You know that whenever you let go of your ambitions that the farm will always be here for you.”

“I know, Pete,” I said, recognizing that Pete was telling me that he trusted, respected and cared for me. “I just worry that I won’t be able to offer the same commitment as you, Jennifer and Sara.”

“With all the things you have going in your life, you’re here right now ain’t you?” he said. “I think you already have.”

*There is an essential skill I cannot give you. It is “feel.” ... Many variables affect the final results. ... The remedy for this is to develop a feel for the dough that comes only with practice and experience. ... Feel means an intuitive sense that a dough is exactly as it should be: properly hydrated, supple, lively and springy, mixed long enough to develop gluten, and finally fermented at a temperature and time frame conducive for that particular bread.*

A couple of weeks after Pete sold the cows, he asked me if I’d come up to the farm to help him pour some concrete. The old milk parlor had been converted into a cleaning and storage room for the portable milk tank we now transferred milk in. Pete had created a custom track and hydraulic lift to be able to roll the 2,000-pound vessel off the bed of his truck. There was a small glitch in the system: a four-inch lip between the sliding door of the storage room and the corral, a design feature that kept manure and urine from flooding the milk parlor back when cows were kept out on the corral.
The platform we were pouring would allow the day’s milk transporter to lower the milk tank away from the building and approach the door from a level surface, sparing them the need to wrestle the tank up and over the little step.

When I arrived, I heard the commotion of the cement truck backing through cattle gates onto the corral, so walked straight back. I noodled my body through the metal head catches that created individual feeding stalls at the trough.

Pete looked at my paint stained jeans, my gray long-sleeved t-shirt that was worn so thin there were huge holes under my armpits and my muck boots whose seem I’d recently split.

“Don’t you look like you’re ready to do some real work.”

“Couldn’t pass up the opportunity to put on some ratty clothes, get a little dirty and learn another essential skill.”

Pete flashed me a grin and began to explain what would happen.

He had already built the mold for the platform (a simple wooden structure reinforced with rebar and wire) the day before. Robert, the fellow with the truck, was going to pour concrete straight into the form. Pete and I needed to use the shovels, rakes, and come a long (a special concrete rake) to distribute the cement, paying special attention to filling the corners.

“Make sure to pull your shovel up and down a bit to make sure there aren’t air bubbles and it settles evenly,” Pete said.

Robert set the cement truck turning and swung its chute over the mold with the push and pull of a few levers and joysticks on the outside of the truck.
“Robert, show Emily how you can drive the truck forward and back from the outside,” Pete said like a little kid.

The truck lurched forward and then back into position before the concrete began to glob down the slide and slap into the mold.

“Work quick,” Pete said dragging a heap of gray glop towards his corner. Between the three of us, we had the frame filled in a matter of minutes.

“Okay, now we screed. Grab that board,” he said pointing to a long two-by-four. “Use lots of pressure.”

We sawed the board back and forth jiggling out air bubbles and leveling the surface.

“One more step,” he said handing me a bull float, a flat metal plane with a handle. “Keep one edge skimming the surface and the other elevated off so you slide the water along the top like slip. This is finishing work. Make it smooth.”

I let the bull float glide above the concrete causing the surface to moisten and become patterned with my crescent stroke.

“Damn, you’re a natural,” Pete said offering a rare compliment.

“I think I was made for work like this,” I said as I knelted over the slab. “Want to hear a story about little Em?”

Pete took a pull off his beer and leaned against the milk tank room, “Of course.”

“When I was in the seventh grade, I had to take one of those aptitude tests that tell you what you’re supposed to be when you grow up,” I said sitting back on my heels. “When the results came back, all of my friends got these fancy white-collar jobs: lawyer, doctor, neurosurgeon. Do you want to know what I got?” I asked.
He continued to lean, waiting.

“Plumber. Followed by butcher and brick layer.”

“All of those things sound like a terrible life. To be a brick layer would be back breaking.”

“I came home devastated and told my dad. The next morning, he came home with a dozen doughnuts. ‘It’s professional development,’ he said to me. ‘If you’re going to be a plumber, we’re going to have to work on your crack.’”

Pete laughed, a mist of beer escaping from his mouth.

“You do seem to have a knack for trades.”

“I always felt lesser for those suggestions,” I said. “But the older I get, I think that maybe there was some truth in the results.”

“Your work looks pretty dang good to me. I can’t tell what work is mine and what is yours. I sure hope this is the last bit of cement I ever have to pour on this place,” he said. “You know, once you pour concrete on a place, you’re forever a part.”

When I sat up and looked at Pete standing surrounded by the place he restored and the life he built, I believed him. I couldn’t tell the difference between the work of his life and what I hoped for mine.
Notes


TEAR

Our weakness can never be eliminated; 
neediness is part of what we are. 
Living is a kind of wound; 
a wound is a kind of opening.

Tony Hoagland  
“Letter to a Former Friend”

I

I started running because seemingly well-adjusted people in my life were doing it. They talked of distance running with an almost spiritual fervor, a way to move through life’s challenges.

I had always hated running. It reminded me of evaluations that I always underperformed at and punishment: my mom sending me out of the house to run circles around the block when she deemed I had too much energy; the annual mile run in gym class; running ladders on the basketball court for each of my missed free throws during the previous night’s game; the fitness test at the start of each colligate basketball season, a supposed measure of if I had been active enough during the off season.

It wasn’t just that running had a negative emotional context, it felt terrible physically. When I start to run, my legs feel like dead weights. Regardless of how fit I am, my chest tightens and burns as my asthma tantrums and I pant for air. All of the weight of my body feels condensed, channeled through each major joint: hips, knees, ankles, and feet. My bones absorb the shock and pound of each footfall and feel both solid and frail.

Road cycling had always been my bliss: the further and hillier the better. On pavement, I was graceful. My bike’s wheels would turn over and over in rhythm with the
rise and fall of my quads, pulling up on my pedals. I would find perfect centeredness in this glide, the bike at times such an extension of my body it was as if it wasn’t there at all. I merely hovered over the ground, floated through the slipstream. I could always feel my strength: how glut, quad and calf flexed unconsciously with each pedal stroke.

Maybe that’s why, one February, I turned to trail running. After a year of body wearing fatigue, weight loss and the slow slipping away of fitness as a result of a thyroid condition, I was all bone and the memory of what it felt like to thrive. There was no unconscious ease. It was labor to get my body to move. When, after a surgery that removed the left side of my thyroid, I was finally able to elevate my heart rate again, I could no longer escape through cycling. Instead it seemed only to show me all I’d lost, all I could no longer do. To run, felt just as terrible as it always had, but my progress was easier to see. The sense of accomplishment came sooner. I was running. I ran one mile. Two miles. Three.

II

During graduate school, I sought a job at a professional bakery, Crumb Brothers Artisan Bread. Crumb Brothers produced bread based on old world baking techniques. Doughs had a high hydration percentage, a greater ratio of water to flour, and utilized sourdough leavens of natural yeasts. Most loaves required three days to produce from the cultivation of its starter to its bake. Because of the length of time of production, a “baker” might only participate in one step of the process of production such as mixing the dough, forming the loaves or the final bake.

I was a former. Three days a week, I’d arrive to platforms stacked three or four high of large plastic bins full of different doughs. Mixed hours before, the doughs were
left in their containers to ferment and develop. Forming of loaves began when each bin of dough was dumped onto the heavily floured bench, its viscous mass slow to ooze with gravity out of the container and exposed to the air. After the dough was folded into thirds to add to its strength, the person known as the scaler, would cut portions of equal weight to become individual loaves.

During the first few weeks that I started forming, I noticed that the scaler, the first person to touch the dough after it had been mixed, would often voice a comment about the quality of the dough. I kept a catalog of the different words my co-workers used to describe the dough: soft, stiff, strong, dense, elastic, heavy, sticky, pillowy, cold, warm, flexible, elastic, pliable, active, resting.

These words sounded to me like the adjectives of the body.

III

I look back on my child self and often see someone ugly. I wish that I did not have to claim my own history. At the age of five, I was given the diagnosis of childhood bipolar disorder. Twenty plus years later, I still don’t understand what was so different about me that my parents sought out a psychiatric diagnosis. When I asked my mother this question, she cited my infancy, “You just were not a normal baby. You never slept. I couldn’t get you to breast feed. Your basic baby needs would be met – clean diaper, food, held – and you’d still cry. Even then, it just seemed like there was something inside you that you couldn’t control. You expressed so intensely.”

My mother said this to me a lot, “Emmy, you are out of control right now.”
I do not deny that there were moments where I would cry, shake and scream with frustration. There was a lot of fighting between my parents and me about things I experienced that bothered me that they thought shouldn’t be a big deal: the unairconditioned house being hot during peak Colorado summers, how scratchy clothing tags were on my skin, loud chewing at the dinner table.

The chewing. I still tense at the memory of it. We would be having dinner and the sound of my dad’s chewing would catch my attention. I would try to ignore it, but, once heard, the sound would amplify becoming all I could hear and grate on the back of my skull. My plate unfinished, I would ask to get up from the table. And, as is normal for parents to do, mine would insist that I finish my dinner.

“I would really like to eat somewhere else,” I would say.

“Emmy, you need to eat with the rest of the family,” my mom would answer.

“But Dad is chewing loudly again,” I would say.

“I’m just eating, Emily.”

“But it is so loud,” I would say, confused how no one else was hearing this.

“Emmy, leave your dad alone and eat your dinner.”

“Why do you always take his side. Why don’t you ever believe me?”

“Emmy, you need to get it together,” my mom would say her voice stern. “You are getting out of control.”

It was this phrase that would often tip me over the edge because she was right: I didn’t have control. The parent-child dynamic is one where the parent has the power; it is the parent who knows and names the child’s experience. To be told that I was out of control felt like I was being told that what I was experiencing was not only not real, but
not okay. I didn’t understand how I could be hearing and sensing something so clearly that others did not.

When my parents would reach out to touch me in their attempts to defuse the situation I would lash out, confused why the very people who had alienated me were trying to comfort me. My little body would enact the only power it had: speak the words I knew louder, hit and flail to get away.

Not long after one of these incidents, I remember a therapy appointment where, while I played a miniature pinball game in the corner of the room, my parents told the family therapist who had diagnosed me three years before about my latest episode and how they were concerned that I was resulting to “violence.” While intently following the metal pinball, I heard Dr. Raynak say, “It is critical that you suppress this behavior. She has to learn that isn’t okay.”

As had happened before, the next time my parents and I got in one of these escalating arguments, my little self, again desperate to be understood or at least left alone, thrashed to get away from them when they tried to hug me. On the recommendation of Dr. Raynak to teach me that this response was not okay, my dad pinned me to the floor.

Forced on my back, my arms restrained in the position of goal posts, his knees pressed into my quads, I remember my panting sobs and gasps ceasing, my fighting against this force stopping for just a moment when I realized that he was crying as he said, “Emily, just stop fighting. I just want you to be safe. As soon as you calm down and gain control, I will let you go.”
The message was clear: if I did not suppress my experiences, reactions and feelings, they would do it for me. It was the first moment I concluded that the emotions and sensations in my body were not safe to have.

IV

My favorite stage of bread is a prerequisite, a step that comes before, is temporary and is often overlooked: preforming. Functionally, preforming is essential in shaping the final loaf. A chunk of dough is molded so that its mass is distributed in the rough arrangement of its ultimate form. Through this molding, the gluten molecules are activated and re-arranged to create needed strength that will support the ultimate form. After being worked, the forms are given a period of rest to prevent over stretching and tearing of the dough during the final shaping. Preforms are forgiving. They allow a bread maker to get close to their desired form before they are shaped a second time and perfected.

In practice, I like preforming because it is a moment that marks the transition between states. The scaler, concerned with the uniformity of weight, cuts off hunks of dough in assorted polygons, pressing into their centers additional bits and nubbins to round out their weights. As a former, I wait eagerly to be tossed these scraggled forms across the bench. I often stand on my toes and lean forward into the bench, anticipating getting to touch a day’s dough for the first time. As soon as the dough comes in contact with my fingers, I get a sense of its quality – its stickiness, strength, temperature, elasticity – a quiet telling of what the dough needs (to be formed loosely or tightly) to incline them towards their best final form.
As I begin to form rounds there is an immediate coming together. I take the edge closest to me and begin rolling it into itself. As the dough is tucked inside the square, two-dimensional chunk of dough transforms into a three-dimensional curve, ballooning into an orb cradled by my hands. The dough’s inner folds become hidden by the ever more taught outer layer.

Sometimes, as I roll the dough into itself, I will push the dough too far and create a rip in its skin. When it breaks, this hole becomes a window into the dough’s lumpy inner mass, messy and imperfect, a stark contrast to its smooth outer surface. To salvage the form, I must stretch the dough further, widening the whole so that an unstretched inner layer is pushed to the outside through this opening to encase the dough’s innards to become the form’s new skin.

V

I recognize now that the moment my father restrained me traumatized my parents, too. They never tried to again. It was after this incident that they began aggressively pursuing different medications to try and regulate my being.

When they would supervise me take the medications each morning and evening, I would try to hide the pills underneath my tongue to spit out later. As an eight-year-old, I was given medications like Depakote and Trileptal, big gun antiseizure medications that some practitioners had seen effective in treating their adult patients with bipolar disorder.

My parents were pleased with the effects of the medications. They observed a sedated Emily. It is hard to have reactions to an external and internal world that has been rendered dazed and numbed. Despite the reinforcement they offered me about my
improved behavior, I resisted the medications not only because my parents’ adamancy that I needed them echoed the message that I had been hearing that who I was and what I felt was not okay, but because they dispossessed me from my sensing body. I hadn’t learned yet how to keep feelings from being overwhelming, but without them I felt flat.

Even from this early age, I pursued activities the pulled me away from home and my parents’ perceptions of me. My spare time was primarily spent away and outside shooting baskets at local parks. Most evenings and weekends, I loaded a backpack with my basketball, some water, peanut butter crackers and Curious George fruit snacks. At first, I would walk a couple of blocks to the basketball hoop in our neighborhood’s park, but as I got older I would pedaled five to ten miles from home to different basketball courts around the area.

I think that after the experience of being restrained physically and then bound by medications, I wanted alternative ways that I could inhabit and feel my body. These activities of repetition where I got to practice again and again movements and sensations that posed no threat – the choreographed steps that lead to a successful layup, how to catch the force of my momentum and come to a hard stop to sink a jump shot, the slight gripping of a basketball’s seams against the grooves of my fingers before released from my hand towards the hoop, free throw after free throw – kept me tethered to a somatic experience where I was okay, despite the narratives about the acceptability of my feelings that took root in my mind. Even when riding my bike was utilitarian – a means to get me away from home to a basketball court – it was my first way out.
VI

I surprised myself by how quickly I got addicted to running. Maybe my motivation to run further and faster shouldn’t surprise me; it enacted my oldest coping strategy. My childhood years had formed me into a colligate athlete and distance cyclist. The control I had when I exerted myself physically made me feel strong, capable. Physical and emotional control had become entwined.

My emaciated state post-thyroid surgery made me unrecognizable to myself. At the same time, a state of depression was growing that I didn’t want to face. It made me question if the diagnosis I’d received as a child, my mother’s proclamations that I was out of control, that there was something wrong with my brain, were true. I believed that if I could learn to move through the physical discomfort and suffering of running, something I’d always resisted, that I would prove to myself that I could also move through the emotional discomfort and bout of depression I was experiencing and viewed with equal resistance. And so, despite my shortness of breath, the burn of winter air in my lungs, how foreign it felt to clumsily slog up trails, I had fevered desire to learn to find ease in this effort.

From the very beginning, my relationship with running puzzled me. There was a lot of self-inflicted discomfort, but almost immediately, running gave something to me; it humbled and simplified my being. Where cycling brought me out – out of the house, out of a flawed body and mind, out about in the wider world – running brought me in. When I was on a run, my attention was dedicated on three things: getting air in my body, moving my feet forward without tripping, and an absolute honesty with myself about what I could sustain. The further I ran, the more I was emptied.
I ran the same routes – the Bonneville Shoreline Trail, the River Walk Trail, Green Canyon – over and over again, on each run trying to make it just a little bit further. Three miles became five. Five miles became eight. All of a sudden, I recognized I was running the distances of some of the runners in my life I so admired. These were distances I’d never even entertained I could go. Whereas before I thought them crazy for their talk of running marathons and 50Ks, now I was beginning to wonder if I was capable, had the mental fortitude, to run these distances too.

VII

One mid-summer Monday, I arrived to a sweltering hot bakery. The night baker had forgotten to turn the oven off and the air-conditioning was broken. With bread, there is a relationship between temperature and speed. The warmer the environment the more yeast thrives. The doughs that waited in their containers undergoing their bulk fermentation were developing fast. Too fast. Amber, the mixer that morning, recognized this and had condensed our forming schedule to help ensure the dough did not over proof and compromise the bread’s final structure or create an acidic flavor. We were rushed.

When we got to the sourdough, our fourth type of bread of the day she said, “We are getting to this bread just in time. It’s at peak activity.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Touch it,” she said. “Do you feel the water?”

I reached out and pressed my fingers breaking a sheen of moisture on the dough’s surface as they pushed through to the heart of the dough. A high hydration bread, the sourdough often feels wet throughout, but it was as if it was covered in a layer of dew.
The gluten was being stressed by the rapid release of carbon dioxide, the result of fermentation, pushing against it from the inside.

“The gluten is about the break down,” Amber said. “When it does, it will no longer be able to retain the water. That’s why it is leaking.”

To me it sounded as though the dough was crying.

VIII

The first few months I trained revealed that I was a naive runner. I ran the first four weeks of a marathon training plan in a pair of shoes that were a size too small. I deemed the blisters that formed on the tip of my left second toe and underneath its nail as a necessary toughening up of the body. Even though they burst and seeped after every run and eventually caused my toenail to mound, I figured that eventually they would callous over like my heels and the balls of my feet that were gradually becoming less sensitive to the rocks and sticks that pierced the trails with every mile ran and each new layer of skin.

My toughened, desensitized feet satisfied me, as did the slow hardening and sculpting of my muscles that carried me further and further as I accumulated miles of running. I methodically put my runs into a spreadsheet and clutched the progress represented by the growing number of my weekly total miles.

Even though I had ascribed running as a metaphorical way to deal with the depression I was experiencing, it did not work functionally. It was all well and good to believe that I could overcome my mind and toughen and desensitize myself to the physical discomfort of running in place of facing my emotional pain, but the body has a different logic. Instead of replacing the heaviness of depression and a mind that told me
that I was not okay, running brought me closer to it. My knees and hips registered the impact.

During all of those months of intense running, it was common for me to get home from a run, step into the shower and watch my skin whiten as the accumulation of dirt on my legs swirled down the drain. I would dress in my softest cotton t-shirt and sweats to lay on the floor to stretch only to find myself crying.

Years of keeping my emotional experience on the inside to protect myself from being rejected by the outside world, I would curl into a ball, believing I could somehow keep my depression and sadness inside, but having been pushed so far, having felt the pain and pounding, my body could no longer contain what had been pressing from the inside for so long. I would shake and weep.

IX

After six years, of resistance to being on medications, at fourteen I told my mother that I was old enough to have agency and control over what I put in my body and that she could not force me to be on medications anymore.

“That’s fine, Emily,” my mother said in defeat. “If you make that choice, though, you still have to be accountable for your behavior. You can try not being on medication, but you have to prove that you can control your emotions and reactions.”

“Okay,” I said. “But you have to give me time to figure out my own way.”

Even though it was the suppression of my feelings and creativity that I disliked most about being on medication, suppression, along with spending time away from home on my bicycle and the basketball court, were really the only tools I’d ever been given to keep the emotions I felt regulated in the way that my parents demanded. And so, my own
way ended up being a self-inflicted numbing and avoidance of the very feelings I wanted so badly to have, but had been told were not acceptable.

I began spending lots of time fleeing as far away from home as my body could take me on my bicycle. Within the year, I’d familiarized myself with every mile of the trail systems, bike lanes, and paved country roads within a twenty-mile radius of my home. I had spent so many hours looking at the satellite view of Google Maps as I planned my routes and rode them that I could recite information about the location of gas stations to fill my water bottles, the number of lanes on a road or if there was a shoulder for most streets in my surrounding area.

One fall day, I was out on a sixty-mile loop, exploring the patchwork of farm fields and rolling hills north of where I lived. I was lost in my own thoughts, captured by the precision of green that striped a freshly cut alfalfa field as I grinded up a mile-long incline. The hill crested right at a county line, something I’d come to recognize by a change in pavement surface. The downhill granted me momentum on the perfectly smooth asphalt and a breeze kissed my sweat slickened skin. In that moment, I sat upright on my bicycle saddle and let go of my handlebars. Struck by the gentleness of the breeze on my skin, I rode with my arms extended out at my sides, palms forward to catch the softness of the sensation. By myself on that road, in a place I’d never been before, I felt content, whole and comforted in a way I never felt under the weight of my parents’ perceptions of me. For a time, I believed I had escaped.

X

I was just over halfway through my first running race, the Antelope Island 50K. The first part of the course kept the western perimeter of the island and the large body of
the Great Salt Lake in sight as it climbed towards the island’s central spine, Frary Peak Ridge. When I crested the ridge to descend towards Fielding Garr Ranch on the eastern edge of the island, I realized I had run the first sixteen miles too fast. My fatigued muscles nearly gave way as I began down the rocky dirt road. The extra weight of gravity driving my feet into the ground nearly caused my legs to give out from underneath me. This jarred me. Typically, a confident downhill runner, I had counted on these miles mid-race to boast my moral. Instead, I hurt more than when I was climbing and doubted my ability to run sixteen more.

The sound of a playful *yip-yip* jolted me out of my inner headspace. Elizabeth, my support crew for the race, came towards me from the other direction, her hunting orange hat blazing cheer.

“You’re doing a great job! How are you feeling?” she asked.

I responded with silence. I didn’t want to admit to her, or myself, that I hurt and felt terrible.

Although I knew that she was running to accompany and support me, the mile we ran together exhausted me. Thinking about having her around and see me struggle made me want to sob. I felt exposed. I didn’t know how to exist with the emotional precariousness and pain I was experiencing and another person.

“Having you around makes this harder,” I said finally.

“Okay,” Elizabeth said turning back up hill without missing a step. “I will see you at the finish.”

After she left, I cried all the way down the hill because I didn’t want to be alone with my thoughts either.
When I reached the ranch, near mile eighteen, the terrain leveled following northward the eastern shoreline of the island. The sight ahead became the unbroken grey of the overcast November sky and the salt tinted water. The pattern of my footfall became as uninterrupted as the flat trail and created a monotony to the sensations of my body. My legs began to move on their own volition, and my mind lapsed in its attention to where I needed to place each footfall. That’s when I caught my left toe on a rock and watched the ground grow closer before, by some miracle, my next step caught me just before I face planted in the dirt. The panic and shot of adrenaline compressed my lungs and made me gasp and choke for air.

Having witnessed my stumble and hearing me fight for breath, a runner who had just overtaken me turned to see if I was still upright. What I recall of this moment was not that I managed to maintain composure and ultimately finish the race, but that I still felt I could not walk or stop because I feared falling apart.

XI

When I first started forming bread at Crumb Brothers, I would ask my colleagues to watch how I was handling the dough and offer feedback on my technique. I was often frustrated by the imperfections in my forms: their asymmetrical shapes, tearing along their seams, or how they seemed to lack surface tension and deflate.

One morning, after forming several of the ugliest and dog-boned baguettes you have ever seen, I called on my friend Shauna (and her decade-plus of bread experience) over to help me identify what I was doing wrong. As I made my fifth or sixth pass over
the dough, moving my hands from its middle to its edge to stretch it out like a worm,

Shauna slide swiped her hand between mine and the dough I was working.

“Just stop, Emily,” she said adamantly. “Stop trying to force the form. You want to touch the dough as little as possible. It was fine three passes ago. By going over it again and again you are mangling that baguette. The irregularities will couche out.”

A bread couche is a long piece of linen that a baker places between the bread board and loaves while their forms undergo the proofing process before being baked. Between each form, the baker will gather the cloth into a small fold creating a little stall for each loaf. The fold not only keeps the loaves from proofing into one another, but provides a soft structure to help the forms maintain their shape.

In French, the verb *coucher* means “to lay down” or “to put to bed.”

What Shauna told me was that my hands could only provide the foundation for each loaf. Left unworked, the dough would relax and settle into its overall all shape as its inner layers melded to create a unified crumb.

The key was, I had to let it be, let it rest.

XII

The intensity of my running ended abruptly when I became the next in line of several generations of chronic migraine suffers: my mother, my grandfather, my great grandmother. The migraines, a daily occurrence, were further triggered by heat and exertion. I could no longer replace the pain and resistance to the depression I was experiencing for the titrated physical pain of running. I was forced to explore different avenues for responding to my physical and emotional pain.
Even though it could not be my season to run, my feet offered me clues for my healing. Furthest from my head, on my most intense migraine days, I would slip on a pair of my Z-Trails, a minimalist sandal that let the contour of the terrain through their soles, and focus on the sensations in my feet. Often, after having known the world through my toes and heels, I would come home in the evenings and take the large plastic dishpan from my kitchen sink. Filled with hot water and Epson salt, I would place this tub on a towel on the floor in front of my couch and soak my feet.

As I sat there, the light would wane and concede to deep blues. I could feel the salt crystals against the soles of my feet dissolve and slowly work their way into my skin.

During this several month period of rest where I soaked my feet instead of running, they began to peel. Thin flaps of skin appeared around the margins of the raised and calloused parts of my feet: heel, ball, big toe. It was the very places that over the previous year that I had worked so hard toughen and desensitize that began to fall away. These flaps of skin would begin to curl and become like tabs that begged to be pulled.

Once, after I soaked my feet I tugged on these tabs and peeled off whole sheets of skin. As I pulled, I could feel my cells grip just a little longer, still conditioned to protect the vulnerable places on my feet, despite their need to let go and be shed to prevent them from splitting and opening into deep, painful cracks. Softened by the salt water, their resistance finally broke.

I was fascinated by the baby skin that was revealed when these hardened layers were peeled away. Blazed pink and alive, there was an intricacy and detail to the pattern of my foot creases, that I had never seen before. I could not get over the beauty of this new born skin, uncalloused, sensitive and tender.
ANCIENT

I found myself at the Black Sands Beach in Shelter Cove, California, the start of the Lost Coast Trail, not to backpack but for a meditation retreat. The longest stretch of undeveloped coastline in the United States, it is only accessible by foot. The group of us thirty or so retreatants were about to start a nine-mile walk along the drying sand and rocky coastline to the retreat center at Big Flat.

Before stepping onto the beach, at the threshold where the concrete ended and transitioned to sand, there had been a large, hand painted sign warning against swimming due to the topography of the shoreline and its strong riptide. As I walked, rings of sweat formed on my back from my day pack sloshing with the two liters of water and the weight of the doubt I carried as to what the retreat would help me come to see about myself. I had a sense of kinship with the stick-figured human depicted on the sign: suspended upside down about to be swallowed up by the crest of a wave.

For those hiking the Lost Coast Trail, it is important to attend to the ocean and its rhythms. Here, the ocean’s water level swells an average of five feet between low and high tide. At times of storm, water levels can rise twenty feet. Given the proximity of the mountains to the sea, there are several places along the trail that become impassable at high tide. The shoreline becomes flooded with water, pinched off by the steep cliffs. One’s life depends on paying attention to and honoring nature’s rhythms.

After hearing comments like, “My daily Metta practice has changed my heart,” or, “I placed shells from the retreat last year on my altar at home. The waves have been
with me all year,” from some of the other retreatants that sounded woo-woo and made me want to roll my eyes, I had dropped to the back of the group.

Not even a half mile into the walk, people had stopped and regathered up ahead around what looked like a large rock. I slowed my pace down, letting my weight pull me down into the sand with each step, hoping the group would start to move again. I didn’t want to have to engage. As I got closer, I began to hear a chorus of quiet gasps and whimpers.

“It’s a whale,” I heard someone say.

My interest piqued, I looked towards the water, scanning the horizon. I had never seen a whale before.

“Is it alive? Can we help it?” someone else asked.

When I arrived at where the group had reassembled, I realized that what I thought was a rock was a 20-foot long whale, beached on the shore. Its long ebony body reflected the sunlight that was slowly drying out its skin. The whale’s mouth agape, I could see its tongue, a soft mass pulled back towards its throat, as if frozen in place mid inhalation. The mass of this tongue, the sight of the whale’s spine-like teeth and the stream of blood rolling down its jaw made me blink and drop my hands to my side. Its nose was patterned with sores that bloomed like a snowflake fractal.

It was most certainly dead. The whale’s skin was taught, exaggerating a series of cross-hatched lacerations near its tail, its body already bloating from the inside. I could smell the decay – sharp and acrid – that made me want to back away.

Several members of the group had lined up kneeling in the sand before the whale, their eyes closed with their hands on their chest. Other members had approached the
whale laying their hands on its body, seemingly unafraid of its rotting flesh. One of the retreat’s teachers, Ayya Anandabodi, began walking a slow circle around the whale, hands together at her chest, chanting in an ancient language I did not know. Her orange robes, a mark of her ordination as a Buddhist nun and her twenty-five-year commitment to clear seeing, waved in the breeze.

Many people were crying.

As I stood there, aware of the birds circling overhead, waiting for us intrusive humans to clear out so that they could feast, I didn’t understand what I was looking at: the whale itself and people’s reaction to it. The whale looked foreign, its body an odd juxtaposition of the angles and sharp lines of its head and tail and the smooth curves down its spine. I had no idea how a creature this massive could swim. And yet, bellied on the sand, it was clear that it didn’t belong on land either. How did it end up here? I also couldn’t understand why someone would want to touch it, kneel before it, cry for it. I didn’t understand what these folks thought their reactions gained: nothing would change the fact that the whale was dead. The opportunists overhead would pillage and feast on what was given to them. It was going to rot.

When we headed north and began walking, I felt relief to be able to turn away. The whale, displaced and dead was hard enough to see, but the public display of grief and faith was too much for me. I just couldn’t look.

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I want to know why the headaches started. The months with chronic migraines have weathered me. After embodying their symptoms for so long – the narrowed tunnel vision; sensitivity to light that has pushed me into physical darkness behind sunglasses
and blinds; the inability to feel my teeth, decimated down to their throbbing roots; the change in thought, at best foggy and unable to make connections, at worst pessimistic and suicidal – I would accept any explanation for them: medical, emotional, spiritual.

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On the sunny, mid-March morning I found myself waiting for Barrio Bread to open its doors, there was much chatter among folks standing in line about Don Guerra, Barrio Bread’s founding baker, and his recent nomination as a James Beard semi-finalist. With almost twenty-five years of experience with bread, Don was known in the artisan bread community for his use of locally grown, heritage grains and community bakery model. Barrio Bread had become a place of pilgrimage for those seeking not only an excellent loaf, but a community of presence. In front of me in line, a couple from Ashland Oregon explained to another patron that this was the third day of their vacation that they had spent waiting in line for some of Don’s bread. Don, they shared delighted, had learned their names.

I didn’t know if I was going to be able to talk to Don. After hunting down contact information on his website, I’d only found social media platforms as avenues for connection. I restored my Instagram account just to be able to directly message him. It had been a week since I’d introduced myself, explaining my position as a pastry chef at Crumb Brothers and how my graduate thesis utilized aspects of the bread baking process to answer the question, what can bread teach us about what makes a balanced and meaningful life. I’d gotten no response to my offer to be put to work early one morning, or if he’d be open to having me ask him some questions about what bread meant to him. It seemed, like so many waiting with me, that I had made this journey on blind faith.
Before I entered Barrio Bread, the toasted, nutty, tang of the freshly baked loaves met my nose. Through the tall glass windows several wire racks lined with the morning loaves were on display. Minimal space was given to the retail aspect of the bakery with room for only eight to ten patrons inside. Instead, the majority of the foyer housed the eight-window bread oven that opened into the front of the store. The deck oven loader, a long mental frame with a large piece of canvas on a pulley track that allows the baker to slide the loaves into the depths of the oven, consumed most of the foyer. Its swift roar sounded regularly as the day’s baker, visible to customers, continued to move fresh loaves in and out of the oven onto the wire racks that steadily opened up with space as people bought their bread.

Guided primarily by the look of the morning’s loaves and the recommendation of Bianca, who individually bagged loaves for patrons, I selected three types of bread of different flour and leaven types: Apricot-Cranberry, Super Seed Whole Wheat, and Desert Durum. Upon stepping up to the counter, there was Don himself in a short sleeve, collared button up.

“You’re Don Guerra. I didn’t expect to see you behind the counter,” I blurted out as if he was a celebrity.

Don’s face broke into a warm smile. “I try to be here two days a week for moments like this.”

I introduced myself, explained my background with baking and offered again that I’d be happy to get up early the next day and be put to work for the opportunity to talk with him more about his process and bread.
“I’ve had your message pulled up on my phone all morning to respond to you.”

Don said. “Unfortunately, I can’t have you come bake with me. With the recent James Beard nomination, if word or a picture got out that I’m letting people walk in and bake with me, I’d have so many people at my door.”

“That’s okay. I understand,” I said a little crestfallen. “As I said in my message, I’m certain this bread will be worth the trip.”

“You said you drove all the way from Logan? Isn’t that a thirteen-hour drive?” he asked registering the effort I’d made. “How about this, can you come tomorrow at noon? You can ask me as many questions as you want as I finish the day’s last bake.”

Without hesitating, I said yes.

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My body relaxed as I squatted on a narrow, rocky strip of land, a rare section of beach lining the edges of Coleman Bay. The small, cliff enclosed inlet, finger-like, branched off the larger Aialik Bay in the Kenai Fjords National Park near Seward, Alaska. Tucked behind the privacy of a large boulder with an almost obsidian sheen, slicked black by rain, it was a relief to drop my pants around my ankles and pee after having been confined to the rear seat of a two-man kayak for the last several hours.

My sister had gotten married in Homer earlier in the week. To take advantage of the long trip north, my parents and I were now on the tail end of a five-day sea kayaking trip. We had crossed wind chopped waters, traversing icefields to explore the fjords – long, narrow deep inlets of sea granting entrance between high cliffs formed over millennia by the cleave and calf of glaciers. The persistent rock of wave, the ocean’s living body, womb like, had begun to stir something up in me. Riddled by the blue and
sunny skies juxtaposed with the sound of thunder, I would often look upwards expecting rain. I’d not yet internalized that the thunder marked not storm, but the loss of old time that once passed as an imperceptible melt now calved off the surrounding glaciers in an instant, bus-sized chunks of ice falling and crashing into the sea.

Due to a turn in weather, that brought actual rain and high winds, our guide had suggested we stay close to Aialik’s outer shore and go to Coleman’s protected cove. Word had come in on the radio that the wildlife had been good there. It seemed, however, that life was tucked in at home under the surface of the water, protected from the steady slant of rain that had rendered my body numb. The ubiquitous grey made it feel as if the world could have been turned upside down, sky and sea inverted without any change in perspective.

My bladder empty met, all of me softened, my gaze included, now wide and dispersed across the length of the bay. It seems that in this state – vision let to blur, looking at nothing – that I most frequently spot something. There, about ready to call it a day, head back to camp to warm up, I saw it. The excitement and quick movement of my travel companions back towards the kayaks made it clear they’d seen it too – the misty, burst of spray rising from the surface of the water: a whale.

The group instinctually ran towards the boat, an unconscious inclination to get closer, to see the creature more clearly. As we launched the boats back into the water, there was a sharp scrape as the vaulted kayak bottom clutched the rocky shore before the boat lost its moor, and became buoyant gliding in the water. As the first burst of mist rose up and interrupted the monotonous roll of wave, the ocean’s trick, which had placated me into believing it was ordinary.
In the back of my kayak, my view blocked by the paddler in front of me, I thrust my hands and elbows forward blindly fighting the water’s resistance against the yellow flipper of my paddle. I did not understand my desperate need to get closer, proximate, to the whale. Apart from the retreat two years before, I’d never given much thought to whales. They had always evaded me. Perhaps this is why I was so inclined to chase. I’d gotten the smallest glimpse of something previously unknown, alive and thriving.

There was a frantic effort forward only to stop and cease.

In the middle of the bay, we waited on the spot where the whale’s exhale had erupted. When the water leveled, it mirrored the space and stillness at the bottom of my own breath. I knew odds were that the whale wouldn’t appear there again. And yet, I felt a sense of orientation and intimacy to be in the place where something powerful had been. There, in the drift and roll, engulfed in the gradient of grey – sky, accumulated cloud, mist, rain, wave – we waited and scanned the bay, snapped out of our lull, anticipating, vigilant.

When it seemed anticipation could burn no longer, we’d see it again: this time, without fanfare, a partial breech. The whale’s spine crested the water and added its own ridgeline to the landscape. The whale’s path was unpredictable, perhaps the result of how large masses of krill for which it was feeding ran and scattered in fear of its gapping and cavernous mouth. Yet, each moment it crowned, often far from our predictions, our over exerted paddling felt like an offering, a giving of everything we had at the chance to be closer to the whale’s grace and endurance.

At one point when we were resting on the water, our kayaking guide told us about a video that had been circulating on social media. In the video, a large humpback whale
began to swim very close to a marine biologist filming in the water. When the scientist swam away, the whale continued to pursue her looking her directly in the eye before it positioned her underneath its chin and then between its body and pectoral fin. According to the scientist, in the twenty-five years she had been working with whales, she had never had an encounter like this. At one point, the whale pushed her with its fin up to the surface of the water directing her towards her boat. It was then that she saw the shark a hundred yards away. The scientist claims that the whale was protecting her, that the encounter was proof that whales have an altruistic nature and are not only aware, but willing to protect other species.

We never did get very close to the whale that day. After a period of almost twenty minutes there was a recognition that it was gone. There would be no spray or peak to catch. There, paddle pinned between my forearms and the rim of the boat, heavy from the effort, I doubted the story that the guide told. My experience that day, and other encounters with powerful forces, seemed more like chance. And yet, I had been so willing to chase with all my might. I felt a loss when the whale slipped away without word or mark.

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By the third day on a new preventative migraine medication, Topamax, I could feel when the drug kicked in because I would lose my margins. Unlike when I experience a migraine headache – my mind in hyper focus, sight reduced to a painful tunnel vision – on the migraine medication, I was all periphery: I could sense and identify this ooze of being outside of myself as me but could never quite gather it up. Clinicians joking refer to the drug as Dopamax and I understood why: for days I had been uncharacteristically
spacy and docile. Time was muddled and thick. I felt as though I had been navigating a world covered in soap; thoughts slipped by unregistered. I would go to put on my shoes to leave for the day, but forgot to put on my socks. There was no precision or control. This scared me. Losing my mind scared me.

My doctor had warned of the potential side-effects of Topamax: tiredness, loss of appetite, a bad taste in the mouth, numbness or tingling in the hands or feet, slowed thinking. She told me, as she had with the half a dozen other medications I’d been prescribed over the previous four months, that the worst of the side effects would pass in the first three to five days. But on day ten, I’d gone from being a strong and choreographed body capable of doing the morning milking at the local dairy I worked at to a marionette puppet with half the cords to its limbs cut. I could no longer feel the left side of my body, my face sagged and I couldn’t retrieve single words, let alone string a complete sentence together. If you didn’t know better, you would think that I was having a stroke.

When I arrived home from the farm, I stepped in the shower to wash away the smell of cow shit held in my clothes and hair. It was a relief to feel the tingle of hot water on skin as opposed to the pins and needles bursting like fireworks in my hands and feet. I knew the medications were not aiding in healing when I woke up curled like a seed in the tub, cold water from the shower falling down on me. For the first time in my life, I thought about dying.

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Always good with directions and quick to orient to a new place, I unconsciously took the turn wide into the parking lot that opened onto Broadway Village to avoid one of
Tucson’s many pot holes. When I turned the key to cut the car’s engine, it was quarter to noon. I had fifteen minutes until my scheduled chat with Don. After flipping through my notes and questions under the ruse of preparing for a few minutes, I closed my notebook and watched the line of people again waiting outside of the bakery’s door steadily move towards bread. At five till noon, I got out of my car and walked towards the storefront. With each step I became more and more nervous, that even though I wasn’t there to buy bread that day, perhaps I should have waited in line, earned my entrance in, too.

As I slipped through the gap between the line of folks waiting for bread and the door frame, I worried that someone might stop and send me out. My concerns were quickly assuaged when I stepped into the bakery and saw Don placing baguettes on the long surface of the oven loader. He transferred each baguette by placing it along his left forearm, one end in the crook of his elbow, the other in the spaces between his fingers, the form entirely supported as if he were cradling an infant. His babes safely laid down, he looked up and saw me. When we made eye contact he tilted his head to the side as if he was a little surprised I’d actually come, but it seemed his delight outweighed any doubts he had and his face broke into a smile. He waved me towards him with floured hands.

“Okay, I’m ready” he said as he grabbed another board lined with baguettes. “Ask me anything you want.”

“Why bread? What brought you to baking?” I asked first.

“Chance,” Don laughed. “I started college in Flagstaff and needed a job to make ends meet. I got hired on working the night shift at a bakery there. Ever since I’ve been fascinated with the process of mixing ingredients and how they are transformed.”
For a moment he stopped transferring baguettes, stood up straight and looked me in the eye. “It doesn’t matter how much of the science I learn, it still feels like magic.”

When the oven timer beeped a few minutes later, Don continued to attend to the baguettes in front of him. Aligned in rows on the canvas of the oven loader, Don gently touched each one, pulling the skin like surface on the outside of each form taught before piercing it with his lame, a sharp razor blade at the tip of a long wooden handle, that allows a baker precision when scoring a loaf. Beyond providing a pattern and aesthetic to the baked loaf, the slits’ real purpose is to ensure an even bake. The depth and angle of cuts create weak spots in the form that provide needed space for the loaf to expand further when in the high temperatures of the oven. Without these places where tension is released a loaf will bulge wherever there is a random weak spot that resulted from shaping the loaf.

Fascinated by the tenderness in which Don touched each form contrasted with the quickness of his cut, I asked, “What are the qualities you feel for when working with bread?” I expected Don to respond with details about how the moisture of dough feels in one’s hands, or how he as a baker relies on color, texture, smell or technique to guide his process. Instead he spoke to the mindset that a baker must bring to the bread.

“It’s really about being mindful. Bread is not something that you can control. You are there to just shepherd the bread. Fermentation is organic. You are there to provide some sort of leavening, but once you inoculate that inert ingredient mix – flour, water and salt – things come alive and your role is to just manage it the best you can. The best bakers are those who understand that they are not in control.”
With this and all of his loaves scored, Don grabbed the handle at the end of the oven loader. Lifted out of a groove, the canvas pulley system was unlocked. In one swift motion that was propelled by his whole body, Don slid the canvas forward pushing the twenty loaves in a long line into the waiting oven, the glass door clanged with a finality when he pulled the oven loader back to its original position. The canvas now empty, Don slid the oven loader to another window, again pushed the canvas forward with his whole self and brought out from the oven, four pans of focaccia. He hadn’t forgotten about the timer.

Despite all of the bread things Don was actively attending to, he had not forgotten my question about what he looks for in bread, either. He continued, “Every day I walk into the bakery, I like to wear the same clothes” and pulled at the collar of his chef coat. “When I walk in the door, I feel it: the differences in the environment that give me an idea of what the bread needs. I am really here to take care of the bread. This is about being aware not just of the medium, but of the environment.”

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Three years after I first sat the Lost Coast retreat and just after my trip to Alaska, I found myself in Shelter Cove a third time. It was the night before the retreat was scheduled to begin and a group of five participants had gathered at Black Sands Beach to watch the sunset.

When I stepped onto the beach, the black grains still held the heat from the day. It was an unexpected homecoming for me to be returned to the sea. The shoreline, backed by the sheer mountains textured with pines, makes a perfect crescent. Unable to see past the peninsulas at each end, the landscape itself encourages you to look outwards at the
endless ocean. The vastness makes it impossible to register each wave, one’s gaze forced to soften and blur. I always feel quieted and emptied by the breaking waves. It’s as though, as they grow smaller and disappear beyond the horizon that I do, too.

The five of us sat in a line on the last bit of dry beach in front of the ocean. Despite the opportunity to talk, it seemed we didn’t know how, conditioned from previous retreats to sit in silence.

At one point, a woman I’d not met until that evening said, “To be honest, I find being here a little underwhelming. Don’t get me wrong, the sand and the water are nice, but I’d be happier if there was some wildlife. I’d settle for a bird even.”

As if summoned, just moments later, a bird flew across the horizon.

We were all a little awed by the coincidence, but Sarah, a conservation biologist was especially struck.

“That was amazing,” Sarah said. “Not only did you call that bird, but it was a Brown Pelican.”

“What’s special about that?” the woman asked.

“Brown Pelicans nearly went extinct in this area in the 1960’s,” Sarah explained. “They had total reproduction failure due to loss of breeding grounds and the use of DDT. Brown Pelicans are one of the first successfully recovered species.”

“Well shit,” the first woman said. “If I knew I had the power to summon rare creatures, I’d have asked for a whale.”

The group laughed until Sarah said, “Maybe we should try it. Let’s all ask a whale to come?”
“Come here whale. Here whale.” my four companions began to chant together as if calling a dog. “We’d like to see you.”

It was light hearted and all in good fun, but something about the joking and insignificant requested made my body tense. When I arrived home from Alaska an issue of one of the literary magazines I read awaited me in my mailbox. Serendipitously, the issue was based on the ocean. Out of the entire magazine, a single Cormac McCarthy quote from *Whales and Men* stuck with me:

What if the catalyst or the key to understanding creation lay somewhere in the immense mind of the whale? Suppose if God came back from wherever it is he’s been and asked us smilingly if we’d figured it out yet. Suppose he wanted to know if it had finally occurred to us to ask the whale. And then he sort of looked around and he said, ‘By the way, where are the whales?’

The breaking of waves was stirring something up in me again. The Alaskan landscape had been the wildest place I’d ever experienced. And yet, this sense of the untouched was accompanied each day by the roar of ice cleaving off glaciers at unprecedented rates. The loss was so massive, that when the ice parted the surface of the ocean its crack reverberated miles across the bay. The thunder would rouse me from my sleep at night. The landscapes of my daily life were already so infiltrated by humans, it was easy to be complacent. When my valley fills with poisonous particulate matter each winter, or with the smoke from when the West burns, the smog veils the sun. When not even light can cut through, I feel as though the damage has already tipped beyond repair. The hurt of this impact stuns me. It is hard for me to understand how, despite all humans have done to the land, nature still persists.

“I think it matters how we ask,” I said aloud.
And then, in a gesture that surprised myself, I got up and kneeled before the ocean. Throughout my early spiritual practice I had been hesitant to get on my knees, would never bow, always holding the question, to what or to whom was I surrendering?

In that moment, I didn’t believe that a whale would actually hear me. I think instead, it felt important for me as a human to change the tenor of my own dialogue.

I closed my eyes and turned my hands palm up on my thighs. I didn’t have a plan for what to say, I just riffed.

“'I know that you are out there somewhere. There is a part of me that wants to see you. I know that you have a life independent of me, of humans, that I am entitled to nothing from you. And yet, there’s something. Not only does seeing you leave me with a sense of awe, wonder and new perspective, but I sense I have something to learn. There is something I need to see or hear.’”

When I opened my eyes, my friends were quiet around me their gaze distant in the place of imagination. We sat there for a few more minutes as the sun was halved by the horizon and then disappeared.

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One of the early medications my doctor put me on to try and treat the migraines was a tricyclic frequently used to treat nerve pain, insomnia and depression, Amitriptyline. Taken at night, the medication would hit my body fast making it laden and dull. I slipped into a dense and dreamless sleep only to wake up the next morning to find my eyes sealed shut with goop. It was as though my body had cried throughout the night and my subconscious had petrified my tears so that my waking self could witness my
pain. It was harder to push through the weight of the drug than the preceding depression and get out of bed each day.

When I told my doctor about the intensity of these side effects, she told me that I was one of the most sensitive and reactive patients she had ever had to medicine. She suggested that, if I found the downfalls of the drugs so aversive, another option would be for me to just live with the migraines. The insinuation that I could simply learn to suffer more gracefully not only made me feel isolated, but also seemed negligent of someone whose job it was to provide care and aid in healing. It seemed even my doctor was turning away.

Not long after this conversation, I found myself lying on the rug of my living room hopeless and despairing over the loss of so many perfect spring days due to migraines. All week I had kept myself indoors on the pretense that if I rested then the next day I would be migraine free, miraculously more in control of my sight and body. Day after day of no change, I realized that there was no promise that the migraines would go away.

That dictum, live with it, looped in my mind. If I had to live with migraines, what parts of my life did I need back to make them worth living with? Despite the spaciness that resulted from the migraine aura I experienced, leaving me as though I’d stepped back onto land after a long time out at sea, I decided that what I needed in that moment was to run.

I set off for one of my regular routes, a nine mile out-and-back along the vein of Green Canyon, a run I did at least once a week, regardless of the season. The single track that paralleled the road was familiar to my feet. I figured that even if my mind couldn’t
track the trail, at least my feet could guide me. As my breathing became more labored, I recognized that the further I progressed along the trail, so did the migraine from the exertion. Although my head throbbed in tandem with my pounding heart, it seemed that the slow pace and short steps of the climb allowed me to maintain my bearings.

A more natural downhill runner, when I turned around and began to descend the canyon, I lengthened my stride and tried to let my body accelerate with the pull of gravity as I had on many previous runs.

My first few footfalls alarmed me. I could not feel them. The migraine had not only left the world liquid and sliding, it had numbed my feet. Without any anchors, I feared that my body would give out and that I would fall. Yet, step after step, I was still standing. As I abandoned my mind and its sense of my body, I resided more and more in the rhythm of my breath, integrated with my stride after many miles of running. From this place at the root of me, where the source of my breath was suspended in the bowl of my pelvis, something whispered to me that I was much more than my mind. Regardless of if I could feel it, I knew that my body and the ground on which I tread were solid. Each step became an ultimate practice to abolish my dependency on my mind. Something else within kept me steady. I was supported by the earth.

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As I stood next to Don and watched him rhythmically put loaves in and out of the oven in an unconscious motion, I thought about the number of loaves of bread he had baked in his twenty-five years in the industry and if there were baking moments that stood out to him. I wondered the extent to which he considered the environment which supported his medium, bread.
“Do you have a loaf that you’ve made that remains the most memorable of all of
the ones that you have baked?” I asked.

“Oh, by far, the first time I made a loaf using the heritage grains. It was an ah-ha
moment,” he said his eyes twinkling with glee. “This was maybe eight years ago before
anyone in the industry was focused on local grains. I already knew that there was
something to it.” He continued, “I would be sweating at night after mixing my dough and
it was fermenting. But when I woke up in the morning and baked it off I just felt in my
knees that this was going to be my life. As soon as I cut into the first loaf, I said aloud,
‘Damn, I knew it was going to be awesome.’”

“What made it awesome,” I asked.

“It was the look of the loaf: caramel browns I’d never seen in bread before. There
also were the aromas. Fresh meal flours like that, there’s no other smell like it. It smelled
like Tucson: really earthy and like the hot sun.”

In eight years since that first batch of bread made with heritage grains, Don
became one of the primary catalysts for the restoration of Sonora wheat and a local grain
economy.

An ancient grain and the oldest know variety of wheat in the Americas, Sonora
wheat found its way to the United States in the hands of the Jesuit missionary, Father
Eusebio Kino. Originally named in Spanish as a candeal cereal, or suited for the
production of communion bread, Sonora wheat was quickly adopted by the indigenous
peoples of the Piman and Yuman communities for its disease and drought resistance as
well as its high yields. The glutinous white flour produced a stretchable dough suitable
for the production of large flour tortillas that led to the rise of burritos and chimichangas, now trademarks of borderland cuisine.

Needing only early spring rains, but not late season water, Sonora wheat turned the Gila River and Central Valley into the United States’ breadbasket of the West from the time of the Civil War up until the 1930’s when the Gila and Salt Rivers became dammed by immigrants, diverting waters away from the Pima people. Although this change ended the Pima’s once flourishing wheat economy, Sonora wheat continued to be dry framed by natives on the Papago Indian Reservation.

Long known for its excellent baking qualities by artisan bakers, it was Norman Borlaug, the plant breeder who brought the United States wheat for two growing seasons and who kickstarted the Green Revolution, whose wheat, Sonora 64, ultimately stamped out the foundation of the Southwest’s first holy bread.

The possibility of Sonora wheat laid dormant in the hands of a few native farmers who still transported their grain to the Southwest’s oldest mill Hayden Flour Mill and in the Native Seeds/SEARCH seed bank. Now partnered with both Native Seeds/SEARCH and Hayden Flour Mill, Don has created a network of people and organizations that are united by his bread.

Don reflected on the evolution of his relationship with wheat. “It took years and years for me to understand where wheat comes from. I know that it comes from a plant. I know that it’s milled. I know things about it, but I’d never walked in a wheat field. I didn’t really know what it meant to go see wheat. But that was the ultimate dream as a baker to know.”
As he spoke about all of the pieces of the food system he had his hand in and served as the hub for, I could not comprehend how one person could do so much.

When our conversation reached a natural break, I offered my thanks.

“Oh, I should thank you,” he said as if he hadn’t just given me two hours of his time. “You ask good questions. It was a delight to talk with someone who so obviously cares about bread, the earth.”

“Before I go I’d liked to buy a bag of your flour to bake with at home.”

He snuck behind me to the counter and grabbed a brown paper bag with a picture of him in the middle of a wheat field holding out a bouquet of wheat heads like a fan, arms fully extended in offering. When he dropped the bag of flour into my hands, I felt the weight of the restoration of land, connection of communities, healing of economy he had worked for.

“How much do I owe you,” I asked.

“How about a hug?” he answered.

Overwhelmed with gratitude, I reached out to give him a side hug. He reached forward and grabbed my far hip causing me to face him fully before he encircled me in his arms. Speaking in my ear he said, “You don’t owe me anything. It’s a gift.”

He held me kindly in the hug for the length of time you would hold a dear friend when you didn’t know how long it would be before you saw them again.

When we parted my red shirt had been pinked by layer of flour. It was a gift. My membership in Don’s community had been marked.

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What happened after my supplication to the whale exposed me.
During the walk into the retreat the following day my heart circulated feelings of preciousness and shame. The coastline, transmuted every year by the ocean’s embodiment of winter storms, was ravaged. Areas that in previous years had been beaches of fine sand were large boulder fields. The swell and force of waves had turned up the ocean’s bottom and deposited it on the shore. On two places along the coast, large landslides had defaced the angular sculpting of the mountain’s folds. Flattened, they were now steep tailings of carnage: the body of the land busted open in a tangle of rock and tree limb.

The destruction hurt. And yet, I found myself staring. The rich iron reds of buried soil uncovered in the earth’s turmoil stunned me. Incomparably strong and steady, the earth surrendered and revealed its depths. Among the tattered limbs were sprigs of green. Trees were still alive and had accepted the odd angles at which they were rooted. Creation persisted.

As I tried to take this in, I looked to the horizon where the atmosphere was bent by the heat of the day. In the ether, there it was: a burst of spray.

“No way,” I said aloud.

“What?” Sarah, who had been walking with me, asked.

“I think I just saw a whale. Way out there. To the left,” I said and pointed.

What happened next is inconceivable to me. We continued walking, eyes fixed on the skyline. Enough time passed that I had rationalized with myself that I had imagined it. Then, a little closer now, another burst. Every two to five minutes, in perfect time with grey whales’ breathing pattern, we witnessed burst after burst steadily moving toward us. Finally, maybe twenty yards out, about where the shore abruptly dropped off into deeper
waters, the grey whale lolled. The whale surfaced bobbing with the pace of wave and then barrel rolled towards the ocean revealing its barnacled belly. Surfacing in front of us and then behind us, it was as though the whale paced waiting for something.

The longer it stayed my wonder turned to concern. I remembered the beached whale, shocking out of the water. Was this whale sick? Would it get stuck? Would it be my fault for having asked?

When I voiced these fears, Sarah said, “Maybe you’re supposed talk to it. You said last night that you were willing to see or hear what it had to offer.”

I kneeled again in the sand, this time eyes open. I felt awkward and unsure. Our exchange was simple. I greeted the whale. I explained that its presence rivaled my doubts. It was hard for me to believe that this was a coincidence. I felt as though I had called it. I told the whale that I didn’t know yet what I was supposed to see or hear, but I was still willing. I voiced, as my eyes became oceans of their own, that the whale being there made me feel for the first time that the forces outside of me were supports, wise and kind. I told it I would sit here for as long as it had something to tell me, but that when it was ready, I hoped it could go home.

The whale body surfed in the rise of breaking waves for a few minutes longer before it arched its spine in a deep dive and set its trajectory on the horizon.

That year on retreat, one of the teachers found three vertebrae of a whale spine protruding from the sand on the shore in front of Big Flat. After she asked for permission of the spirit of the whale for which it belonged, she placed one vertebra at the center of our meditation circle to serve as an altar, the life of the whale a symbol of creation to dedicate our practice. The piece of bone felt prehistoric. The bulk of it looked like the
stump of an old tree: dense, holding time, wise. Three arms branched off from this
cylindrical core, two at mirrored angles like extended wings, one protruding from the top
like a fin. Throughout the week, the number of relics and gifts bestowed on the altar
grew. People placed the little treasures they found – shells, sand dollars, feathers – but
also began to offer personal items. One woman, who always meditated with a stuffed
bunny in her hand, placed the rabbit in the crook of the vertebra’s arm. Another left the
picture and funeral program of one of her younger colleagues who had passed away from
a cycling accident at the peak of her life. It was not uncommon to see a yogi kneeling
before the altar with tears in their eyes or their hand on their heart as they picked up items
left by other members of the community before laying down something of their own.

I spent a good deal of time that retreat contemplating what thing I had with me
that would be considerable enough to offer. It felt, given how significant whales had
been, it needed to be big. No item could be that big. Finally, late one night, I confronted
my sense of lack and sat before the whale’s vertebrae. I picked up each item on the altar
and imagined what if might have meant to the person who placed it there. Was it a small
beauty, cause for delight, an object that comforted them when they were hurting, or did it
hold pain?

Whereas three years prior, the death of a whale was senseless to me, something I
could not bear to look at, the death of this whale, its spine a physical link between its life
and mine had become sacred: a space to hold the juxtaposition of pain and blessing, at
times indiscernible from each other.

The objects returned to the altar, I was empty handed. I gave what I had: my
resistance. I reached forward and placed my hands of the two wings of the vertebrae and
bowed. Head on the ground, heart above, womb – the place of the undefinable source in me – highest, I inverted the hierarchy from which to live.

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In the first four months that the migraines expressed themselves, I had one day that was symptom free – a Wednesday. No headache. No nerve pain in my teeth. No tingling in my limbs. No sensitivity to light. No loss of vision. To anyone else, it was an ordinary day.

The morning stretched long as I lingered at my desk watching my chickens chase bugs across the yard. I wrote more in my notebook than I had in months. I was able to be at ease with as opposed to simply manage myself.

That evening when a friend asked if I wanted to help with some yardwork, I felt like I could say yes. Sunglasses free, I contentedly sat hunched over a garden bed, swarmed by the first of summer’s mosquitos, thinning out kale. Even as the angle of the sun’s light rays became flat and directed, I could still look my friend in the eyes. When I went to bed that night, the fine muscles in my face and cheeks were sore, unaccustomed to so much smiling.

Even as I have received more specialized care and better treatment options, symptom and pain free days are still the exception for me. Not only is it hard for those who do not experience migraines to imagine living through the altered existence that migraines bring, they often respond with dismay when I voice that I have gratitude for them.

It is true that at times the migraines debilitate me. Not only do I have to abandon habits of independence, intense periods of work, and exercise, sometimes all I am capable
of is to lay down and breathe. I have found, however, when I surrender to disembodiment and pain, that they have served to score me. In the same way that Don cradles each body of bread, touching it tenderly before wielding his knife, as the lack of control I have over my mind and the pain that results has become more public, I have found myself to be held and supported by my community. As the places of tension in me have been cut free, I have found more space to grow. What I find emerging is a being that, although in the human world might appear dysfunctional, is more primal. To be granted this contact with the elemental continues to bring me into communion with the natural world and Creation: wise, steady, enduring, inclined towards healing, ever giving. It is not in defeat that I drop my head.